



Investigative Interviewing: Research and Practice

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Child Forensic Psychology (2013). Edited by Robyn Holliday and Tammy Marche: A Review

Published by Palgrave Macmillan. ISBN (paperback) = 978-0-230-57708-4.

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Investigative Interviewing: Research and Practice (II-RP)

Published on-line at <http://www.iiirg.org/journal>



A review of Child Forensic Psychology (2013).
Edited by Robyn Holliday and Tammy Marche

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Introduction

One of the reasons why I was willing to review this book is that its publicity stated it uses “...real-life cases to illustrate theory and practices...”. Indeed, some of its chapters do this – if rather too briefly. In fact, it is the editors’ eight page introduction that devotes most words to (three) such cases. The editors’ stated two main aims of this book are (i) to overview the current state of scientific knowledge of memory in children and (ii) to describe how that knowledge is applied to child witnesses’ testimony. Unfortunately, for members of the International Investigative Interviewing Research Group (iiirg), the book’s chapters succeed more regarding (i) than (ii).

The first substantive chapter presents an in depth review of research and theories concerning memory in infancy and early childhood. It correctly notes that until fairly recently it was thought by many in judicial systems that very young children did not have the ability to remember past events, but that nowadays research by developmental psychologists has consensually demonstrated that they usually do to a meaningful extent (if, one should add, they are interviewed appropriately). Of course, very young children have limited verbal ability and thus they need a variety of interviewer skills/support in order to be able to communicate (sometimes non-verbally) what they have experienced. (The chapter is not strong on the latter point.)

The next chapter focuses on adults’ (possible) memory of early childhood events and it mentions some relevant cases. In part it follows on well from the preceding chapter but it also seems to disagree (e.g. “...detailed memories are extremely unlikely to be formed...” in early childhood (but see chapter 5). Of importance to investigative interviewers, it reminds us that memory is very often reconstructive rather than literal (especially of alleged events distant in time). However, this chapter does not succeed in saying how valid prosecutions (or defence memories of alleged events...early in child-hood, cannot be considered accurate...”. Although “...early memories...must be reinterpreted...” (i.e. by the recaller) “...in the current context...” in

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arguments) can ever be brought on witness memory alone. Should no such prosecutions ever be brought? Instead, the chapter states in its conclusion that "...recollections of decades-old which the recaller finds themselves, this in my opinion applies to all interviewees not just those apparently recalling from many years ago.

The following chapter also follows on well from the first chapter by presenting an in depth overview of theories and research, this time concerning memory in later childhood and adolescence. It also reminds us that memory does not reflect a true experience but rather one's interpretation of it. Its highly respected (within psychology) authors make a meaningful attempt appropriately to describe (for practitioners) such important topics as "schema theory", "the source monitoring framework", "heuristic processes", "fuzzy trace theory", and the like but many investigative professionals may, even so, find this chapter hard going. Among its crucial points is that memory for the gist of what happened may work independently from verbatim memory.

The next chapter presents an interesting historical background of child witnessing, emphasising that modern psychological research has clearly demonstrated that children can indeed remember past events. However, it also notes that children take years to develop their memory skills. It describes a pioneering study by Kamala London and colleagues on younger children's limited awareness of the factors/situations that can taint their memory reports (i.e. of 'meta-suggestibility'). Also noteworthy is the description of "passive forms of illusory memory" that can arise from 'auto-suggestion' (i.e. in thinking about what one has experienced one prompts oneself with suggestions), some of which can lead to subsequent incorrect recall.

For me the following chapter (by Karen Salmon and one of the editors) was the most interesting in the book, over-viewing research on children's memory for emotionally negative experiences. Although this chapter rarely mentioned specific court cases, it contains an innovative perspective and correctly mentions several important topics that as yet have been neglected by researchers and practitioners/professionals. Crucially, this well informed chapter advises that, in general, memory for "central emotional information" is stronger for negative than for positive experiences. However, it also notes that children with poorer emotion regulation tend to make more errors when recalling negative emotional experiences. Even so, the chapter correctly emphasises that more research is sorely needed on the effects of their psychopathy on young children's reports of events, difficult as such research is to conduct. In its conclusion this chapter reminds us of how very important when interviewing children is rapport building (and I should add, its maintenance), but it notes that there has been a lack of research on this. (Members of iirg interested in how to establish rapport with young children could benefit from reading Dr Kimberley Collins' recent work.)

Investigative interviews of children are the focus of the next chapter which comments on the wisdom of using 'cognitive interview' techniques with children, especially in the light of research on turn-taking in ordinary conversations in which we all learn to say just a little about a topic before 'passing the ball' back to the other person. Indeed, it points out that the ways in which adults normally talk with children is a recipe for disaster in investigations. With regard to interviewer training, it is noted that studies of the effects of 'initial training' have found few long lasting effects unless ongoing evaluation/supervision is also provided.

The following chapter focuses not on the competence of interviewers but on the (legal) competency of children, especially in the USA where relevant requirements seem stricter than in several other countries and not so up to date with research on children's capabilities. This chapter does actually describe several relevant cases. It also mentions the various ways in which in some countries (e.g. England and Wales) modern legislation and resultant court practices seek to accommodate to the needs of children (e.g. testifying via live video-link). It then cites the limited (mock) research on the possible effects of live-link usage on the impact of children's testimony but wisely points out that since such studies were conducted in the USA where use of such technology

is rare (as is the use of video in other investigative/court ways), their rather negative findings may well not generalise to other countries. This chapter also wisely notes that the ways in which children are interviewed will influence assessments of their credibility.

Children's competence is also the focus of the ensuing chapter, this time in regard to their person description and line-up abilities. As are adults, children are poor at providing descriptions of (once seen) persons. Younger children in particular are usually not good at this, partly due to their more limited vocabulary. The chapter calls for more research to be conducted on how best to assist children to provide better descriptions (something my own research had only limited success at). It then reminds us that research usually finds that children, even more so than adults, often choose someone from a line-up/photo-spread that does not actually contain the previously seen person. It then over-views research on methods that might reduce this problem, concluding that at the present time the 'elimination' procedure seems the most helpful, yet far from fully effective.

The final substantive chapter is concerned with the topic of missing or abducted children, informing us that the rate in the USA is around 800,000 per annum! The available yet currently small amount of research on methods of getting people to remember whom to look out for (i.e. a missing child) is described and its rather pessimistic conclusions noted. Clearly, more research is desperately needed on how best to do this. Nevertheless, as the authors note, if only 5% of 100,000 people who have seen a poster could later recognise that child, this would result in 500 people being 'on the look out'.

Overall, I am happy to recommend this book especially as many of its chapters are relevant to practitioners (as its publicity suggests).