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Memory for childhood sexual abuse can be shaped by social conversations: A commentary on

Fagin, Cyr, and Hirst

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Abstract

Conversations can affect memory, including victims' memories of childhood sexual abuse. As reviewed by Fagin, Cyr, and Hirst, victims disclose different types of information to different audiences. This in turn affects their memory of the abuse; the discussed details are reinforced and the related, but not discussed, details are forgotten. The current commentary extends these arguments in three ways. First, it is important to note that not all victims disclose their abuse, and thus not all victims are subject to conversational influences. Second, when victims disclose their abuse they may also experience verbal overshadowing effects, exhibiting impaired recall for the discussed perceptual details. Finally, when disclosing their abuse victims sometimes have conversational goals other than accuracy. Depending upon the audience victims may exaggerate details or focus on how they emotionally responded. These decisions also have memorial consequences; people remember and believe what they said rather than what they experienced.

Keywords: communication, memory, audience tuning, trauma, verbal overshadowing

Despite the disturbing nature of childhood sexual abuse, it has been suggested that memory for these traumatic incidences is malleable. As reviewed by Fagin, Cyr, and Hirst, one way that these memories can be shaped is through the conversations that victims have with other people. Conversations selectively reinforce memory of the discussed details. This in turn leads to retrieval-induced forgetting of the related, but not recalled, details (Anderson, Bjork, & Bjork, 1984). Conversations can also lead people to inadvertently implant false memories into one another via social contagion (Roediger, Meade, & Bergman, 2001).

Although conversations can shape memory, it is important to note that the majority of children remain silent about their sexual abuse. In fact, only about one-third of sexually-abused children disclose their abuse (London, Bruck, Ceci, & Shuman, 2005; see also Alaggia, 2004; Smith et al., 2000). This reticence to disclose is true even when the abuse is suspected and the child is interviewed by professionals. For example, in one study 57% of children whose abuse was independently verifiable (via diagnosis of an STD) denied to professionals that the abuse was occurring (Lawson & Chaffin, 1992). Furthermore, although some people eventually disclose their abuse after time has passed, others remain silent. For example, in one study 27% of women and 16% of men surveyed reported having experienced childhood sexual abuse. Of these abused individuals 42% stated that they disclosed the abuse within one year, 20% stated that they disclosed the abuse at a later time, and 38% stated that they had never disclosed their abuse prior to their participation in the research study (Finkelhor, Hotaling, Lewis, & Smith, 1990).

Thus, only a subset of sexual abuse victims will have conversations with others about their experiences. This decision to disclose or not in turn has memorial consequences. In addition to the conversational factors outlined by Fagin and colleagues, only victims who choose to disclose their abuse will be subject to *verbal overshadowing* effects. This is the phenomenon in

which verbally describing a perceptual stimulus impairs future recognition of that stimulus. For example, in a series of studies by Schooler and Engstler-Schooler (1990) participants were shown a mock crime in which there was a salient perpetrator. Half of the participants were then asked to describe the facial features of the perpetrator, and the remaining participants completed an unrelated filler task. All participants then attempted to identify the perpetrator from a target-present lineup. Results revealed that verbally describing the perpetrator led to a 25% decrease in the accuracy of identifying him. Subsequent results from a meta-analysis (Meissner & Brigham, 2001) and from a series of preregistered replication experiments (Alogna, et al., 2014) revealed that such verbal overshadowing effects are robust. Thus, when a victim discloses and verbally describes abuse-related perceptual details it can impair her memory of these details. These details may include memory for the perpetrator's face (assuming it was an unknown assailant), for music that was playing, for colors that were seen, or for gustatory stimuli that were tasted.

The verbal overshadowing effect is one example of how verbal rehearsal can affect memory. However, other research has shown that the type of verbal rehearsal that occurs matters. For example, as described by Fagin, Cyr, and Hirst, when people discuss past events with others they engage in *audience tuning* by altering their messages to match their audience's attitudes. For example, people describe a target person positively when the listener likes the target and negatively when the listener dislikes the target. This in turn affects memory. People end up remembering and evaluating the target person in line with their biased descriptions (e.g., Higgins & Rholes, 1978; for a review see Echterhoff, Higgins, & Levine, 2009).

These 'saying-is-believing' findings can be applied to victim's memories of abuse. For example, the media has recently focused on the Duggar family, who starred in the TV show "*19 Kids and Counting*". This is because a report was released claiming that the oldest child, Josh

Duggar, inappropriately touched four of his younger sisters while he was a teenager. Two of the victims, Jessa and Jill, have publically responded. Although they confirm Josh's actions they downplay their severity. For example, Jessa stated that Josh was "*a little too curious about girls*" and that although Josh "*made some bad choices*"... "*the extent of it was mild*" ("WATCH: Duggar Sisters Defend Josh", 2015). One could speculate that Jessa and Jill's memories for Josh's actions have been shaped by their prior conversations about them. Given that their parents have publically stated that they do not consider Josh to be a child molester, it seems likely that family conversations about these events have described Josh's actions as a mistake rather than a crime, as curiosity rather than sexual abuse. These conversations in turn have likely colored Jessa and Jill's memories and opinions of the events.

In the previous examples of 'saying-is-believing' effects (and in their discussion by Fagin and colleagues), the focus has been on how biased interpretations of factually accurate information affects memory for those facts. However, when discussing past events people do not always stick to the facts. For example, in one daily diary study, undergraduates self-reported distorting 61% of their retellings by adding, omitting, exaggerating, or minimizing details. Furthermore, these students were relatively forgiving in their definition of what constituted an 'inaccuracy'. Despite labelling some retellings as 'accurate', the students also noted that over one-third of these supposedly-accurate retellings were distorted in some way (Marsh & Tversky, 2004). These conversational distortions can range in severity. Sometimes people simply exaggerate or elaborate upon the facts (e.g., Marsh & Tversky, 2004; Tversky & Marsh, 2000). However, people also admit to lying in about one of four conversations (e.g., DePaulo, Kashy, Kirkendol, Wyer, & Epstein, 1996). Furthermore, the majority of people also admit to

‘borrowing’ stories from other people, retelling other people’s autobiographical experiences as if they were their own personal memories (Brown, Croft Caderao, Fields, & Marsh, 2015).

Similar to the ‘saying-is-believing’ effects described earlier, conversational distortions can also impact memory (for a review, see Marsh, 2007). For example, in one study undergraduate participants were asked to learn and then retell a story in either an entertaining manner or in a factually-accurate manner. These two types of retellings bore little resemblance to one another. Stories told to entertain contained fewer facts, more intrusions, and more exaggerations. This in turn had down-stream memorial consequences. After retelling the story to be entertaining participants were less able to remember the story’s details accurately. They also incorrectly thought that the exaggerations they had introduced during their retellings were part of the original story (Dudukovic, Marsh, & Tversky, 2004). Although this occurs for adults of all ages, such effects are magnified for older adults, likely because of age-related increases in retroactive memory interference (Barber & Mather, 2014).

Once again, these findings can be applied to victim’s memories of abuse. The accuracy with which people describe their abuse likely varies depending upon their audience. For example, when a victim describes her abuse to a police officer she may focus on accurately describing as many details about the event as possible. In contrast, when she describes the abuse to a friend she may minimize certain aspects of the event and embellish others for the sake of telling a coherent and interesting story. The research described above suggest that these biased retellings can negatively impact memory accuracy – over time it will become difficult for the victim to discern between the event details that actually occurred and those that were added for the sake of narrative consistency or emotional impact. Furthermore, this may be especially true for victims from populations who are prone to memory interference effects.

Finally, conversational retellings of sexual abuse will also vary in the extent to which they focus on the facts versus the victims' emotional responses. For example, one individual may focus on the 'who', 'what', and 'where' questions – Who was the perpetrator? What happened? Where did the abuse occur? In contrast, another individual may emphasize the emotions associated with these topics. How did he feel at the time of the abuse? Have his feelings changed now that time has elapsed? How did the abuse affect his feelings for the perpetrator?

Whether a victim's description of the abuse focuses on facts or emotions will depend at least in part upon the identity of the audience. For example, people likely focus more on the facts when discussing their abuse with a police officer or a lawyer. They may also focus more heavily on the facts if they choose to 'go public' and discuss their abuse in a public forum. In contrast, people may focus more on their emotions when discussing their abuse with a therapist, close friend, or family member. They may also focus more on their emotions when the desired end goal of the conversation is increased closeness with the audience; emotional disclosures are known to enhance relational intimacy (e.g., Laurenceau, Barrett, & Pietromonaco, 1998).

Once again, these conversational differences can impact subsequent memory. For example, in one study younger and older adult participants were shown a short play. They were then asked to talk about either the facts of the play, the emotional aspects of the play, or were not given any specific focus for their conversation. Regardless of age, results showed that when people discussed their emotions they later had poorer recall of the play's details and introduced more distortions in the form of inferences and elaborations (Hashtroudi, Johnson, Vnek, & Ferguson, 1994). Subsequent research has extended this effect by showing that a memory trade-off occurs. When people discuss their emotional responses to an event it decreases their ability to accurately recall the event's details. However, it simultaneously enhances their ability to

accurately recall how they felt during the event (Marsh, Tversky, & Hutson, 2005). Thus, the details that are rehearsed are the details that are subsequently recalled.

In summary, conversations can shape memory, including memory for childhood sexual abuse. Although not all victims disclose their abuse, when people do they are subject to verbal overshadowing effects -- describing the perceptual aspects of the abuse impairs a victim's memory of those details. In addition to this, the type of conversational rehearsal that the victim engages in matters. As noted by Fagin, Cyr, and Hirst, people exhibit audience-tuning by biasing their descriptions of the facts to match their audiences' attitudes. However, in addition to this, the identity of the audience influences peoples' propensity to include inaccurate information and disclose their emotional responses. These conversational differences all have memorial consequences. People come to remember and believe what they said rather than what they experienced. Thus, the conversations that people have about their abuse will shape their memories of those experiences.

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