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By Elizabeth A. Quinby, M.A., LPCC

Suggestibility is the tendency of an individual to alter their account of events due to receiving misleading information (Bright-Paul, Jarrold & Wright, 2008; Gudjonnson, 1992; Meissner, Kelly, & Woestehoff, 2015). This misleading information can be in the form of questions asked during an interview; perceived or real pressure from the interviewer; the type, wording, and tone of the questions; as well as information received after an event (Brimbal, Kleinman, Oleszkiewicz, & Meissner, 2018; Gudjonsson, Sigurdsson, Bragason, Einarsson, & Valdimarsdottir, 2004; Meissner et al., 2015). Increased levels of anxiety in the individual being questioned, eagerness to please, desire to avoid conflict, and some personality traits are also found to be positively correlated with suggestibility (Gudjonsson et al., 2004; Meissner et al., 2015; Mitchell Kieckhaefer, Vallano, & Schreiber Compo, 2013). Individuals with cooperative personality types are usually inclined to provide answers but are sometimes mistaken about the information they are offering (Brimbal et al., 2018; Collins, Lincoln & Frank, 2002).

Warning people about the possibility of suggestibility reduces the occurrence of suggestibility but does not eliminate it altogether (Branco, 2018; Butler & Loftus, 2017). Blatantly incongruent information is usually identified as incorrect or incongruent with one's memory, but more subtle misinformation is less likely to be identified (Butler & Loftus, 2017). Within an interrogation, signals such as speech, facial expressions, and gestures are perceived by the individual being questioned and can impact their answers accordingly (Gubi-Kelm & Schmidt, 2017). Over time, these suggestions can 'overwrite' the original memory, creating a new source of information, which is called the misinformation effect (Loftus, 1975). Additionally, since the suggestion happens after an event, the recency effect of the suggestion may make it more salient information (Lindsay & Johnson, 1989). Due to the brevity of sensory memory, a memory of a particular detail of the original event may not be encoded at all, so information or questioning about a specific part of sensory memory may more easily overwrite the original memory (Lindsay & Johnson, 1989).

INTERVIEWS AND SUGGESTIBILITY

Within interviews, free-recall questions are less likely to create suggestibility (Meissner et al., 2015). Leading questions can have harmful consequences, in that it can impact the present interview as well as future interviews and by implanting misinformation (Gudjonsson, 2016; Loftus, 1975; Meissner, Sporer, & Schooler, 2007). During an interrogation, the cognitive load placed on the witness can also impact one's susceptibility to suggestibility (Drake, Lipka, Smith, & Egan, 2013). This is because, as memory resources are exceeded, an individual may struggle to evaluate the source of information they are providing, called source monitoring (Drake et al., 2013). Cognitive load can build when an interrogation is lengthy, particularly if a great amount of stress is placed on the individual, perhaps by their perception of the interviewer or the

interviewer's presumption of their guilt (Meissner et al., 2015). Individuals are likely to attempt to 'comply' with the interrogation and give information the interviewer is looking for, particularly if the interviewer is perceived to be in a position of authority (Meissner et al., 2015). Accusatorial approaches to interrogation, in general, can increase suggestibility due to the high-pressure environments and leading questions that are common among these kinds of interviews (Brimbal et al., 2018; Gudjonsson, 2016; Meissner et al., 2015)

The very process of an interview can increase suggestibility due to questions indicating to an individual that some details are more important than others, particularly if those questions are leading questions (LaPaglia & Chan, 2019). Many law enforcement interrogation practices lack ways to control for validity during interviews (Meissner et al., 2015). For example, studies show that the development of rapport results in more detailed information, but that is not always a priority in an interrogation (Brimbal et al., 2018; Collins et al., 2002; Mitchell Kieckhaefer et al., 2013). Wells and colleagues (2020) recommend that an interview is being conducted as soon as it is 'practical' to document one's experiences in as much detail as possible and give instructions to avoid discussing the event and other methods that may introduce misinformation. Additionally, this interview should be recorded (Wells et al., 2020).

CHILDREN AND SUGGESTIBILITY

Children are more susceptible to suggestibility than adults (Bright-Paul et al., 2008; Otgaar et al., 2018; Meissner et al., 2015). Under the majority of circumstances, younger children are more susceptible to suggestibility than older children (Bright-Paul et al., 2008; Otgaar et al., 2018; Meissner et al., 2015). Contributing factors to higher suggestibility include developmental limitations and a desire to please (Giles, Gopknik, & Heyman, 2002; Meissner et al., 2015). Children develop the ability to complete origins-of-beliefs tasks around age four and begin to be able to identify the source of their thoughts and beliefs (Bright-Paul et al., 2008). Under certain circumstances, misinformation effects appear to be stronger in older children than younger children, particularly if questioning is aimed around the underlying meaning of the event, as younger children are less able to grasp this information and would not be impacted by more vague questions (Otgaar et al., 2018). In this case, older children may be picking up clues from current testing or previous testing, which they are incorporating into their narrative. Individuals who are questioning children should be aware of their age and the potential for suggestibility, and they should be encouraged to take proper precautions (Brown et al., 2017; Giles et al., 2002).

CONCLUSION

Suggestibility is a real concern for individuals within the criminal justice system due to the many ways in which it can be triggered and the delicate balance of engaging in an investigation quickly, efficiently, and effectively while minimizing the risk of working with or from false information. The interviewing or interrogation of a witness or a suspect can be very influential in a case, and the level of suggestibility that occurs in these contexts is a significant factor

(Brimbal et al., 2018; Collins et al., 2002; Gudjonsson et al., 2004; Meissner et al., 2015). Who is asking, how they are asking, when they are asking, and whether they ask in more than one sitting are all factors to consider (Meissner et al., 2015; Meissner et al., 2007; Otgaar et al., 2018; Wells et al., 2020). Controlling for suggestibility in all of these areas at once is very tricky. Some measures can be taken to control for suggestibility, such as carefully worded questions, warning the individual about suggestibility, and coordination between interviewers, but completely eradicating the possibility of suggestibility is difficult (Butler & Loftus, 2017; LaPaglia & Chan, 2019; Wells et al., 2020). Professionals should be aware of how suggestibility may play a role in many different contexts. Interrogations surrounding a crime is an obvious situation in which suggestibility should be taken into consideration. For clinicians attempting to work with clients in therapy and social workers engaging with clients in the field, many situations might increase the suggestibility of the individuals with whom one is working. As a professional, it is one's duty to be aware of these situations and minimize them as much as possible.

AUTHOR'S BIOGRAPHY

Elizabeth A. Quinby, M.A., LPCC, is a positive supports professional for Integrity Living Options, Inc. in Minneapolis, Minnesota, working with individuals diagnosed with SPMI to remain in the community by providing clinical oversight and cognitive behavioral training to skills workers. She is also an outpatient therapist at Mankato Marriage and Family Therapy with a background in working with victims, survivors, and perpetrators of domestic violence. Elizabeth works with the American Institute for the Advancement of Forensic studies as a lead event coordinator for continuing education opportunities and as a contributor to their membership publications, Forensic Mental Health Insider and Forensic Mental Health Practitioner. Elizabeth has research interests in eyewitness memory, suggestibility, false memories, and police interrogations, and she plans to pursue a doctorate degree specializing in these areas.

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