Influences of an Interviewer's Behaviors in Child Sexual Abuse Investigations

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The content of an investigatory interview is one of several factors which may influence the data gathered in the course of a sexual abuse investigation. This article focuses on the impact of an interviewer's behaviors upon the information presented by the alleged victim. Behavioral aspects of the interview which may influence the child's information include inappropriate interactional patterns, emotional reactions of the interviewer, and/or changes in continuity of specific behaviors. Recommendations are made to assist investigators in avoiding these interviewing pitfalls and, thereby, minimizing contamination of the child's data.

Interviewing a suspected child sexual abuse victim involves numerous factors which may influence the data presented by the child. The major issues for the investigator are to insure that (1) a child's information does not become distorted or falsified by confounding influences and (2) that the interviewer's methods are not so profoundly criticized that the child's credibility is also challenged.1,2 If the child's information becomes distorted or falsified or is perceived to have been as a result of the interviewing process, then there may arise charges of contamination.3

As depicted in Figure 1, there are numerous factors which may influence the child's memory as reported by the interviewer. Initially, the event under investigation is uniquely experienced by a child due to both individual characteristics of the child and his/her personal history and environment.4

A second set of influences on the child's report may arise from sources outside the direct interviewer-child interactions. These include (1) technical aspects of the interview and (2) outside influences on the child (i.e., systems). Technical aspects include the manner in which the interview is documented, such as videotape recording, and physical arrangements of the interviewing environment. These influences may exert significant effects on the child's report. For instance, if a child is being videotaped...
and he secretly fears that his image will be shown on the evening news, he may remain very guarded during the interview and may volunteer little relevant material. Another example of technical influences is interviewing a child in his own home or in a noisy room at an agency. Each situation has its own effects. Care must be taken in understanding and acknowledging the limitations of any and all technical aspects of an interview which may interfere with the collection of uncontaminated data.

Systems contamination consists of factors outside the interviewer-child interactions which may alter or influence the child's statements. Examples of systems contamination may include communication between parents and children, media coverage, formal educational experiences regarding child safety and abuse prevention, and community discussions concerning the allegations. The investigator has little direct control over this system contamination but must evaluate its impact on how the disclosure was made and its impact on the content of the allegations.

More directly under the interviewer's control are factors within the interview including (1) conceptual aspects of interviewing techniques and (2) the interviewer's behaviors. Conceptual considerations consist of how the interview is organized and the specific techniques utilized to elicit the child's information. Problematic techniques include leading questioning and coercive techniques designed to have a child disclose information. Planned but then become contaminated by the manner in which they are implemented or communicated by the interviewer's behaviors. The degree to which such behavioral interactions influence the results of an evaluation is determined in part by how much the interviewer attempts to confirm his/her own beliefs concerning the content and validity of the allegation. These beliefs constitute the interviewer's agenda. Seriously counteproductive interviewing occurs when the interviewer holds a strong preconceived impression of what has occurred in the incident and implements techniques to confirm this preconception while ignoring other possibilities. Behavioral aspects of the interview which may influence the child's information include inappropriate interactional patterns, emotional reactions, and/or changes in continuity of specific behaviors. Although each of these areas will be discussed separately, in most cases they may be simultaneously present in problematic interviews.

**Interactional Patterns**

In evaluating an interview for aspects of contamination, the initial behavioral factor to be examined is whether or not specific interviewer-child interactional patterns in the interview appear to influence the child's material. Inappropriate patterns included in this category are behaviors inconsistent with the child's developmental level, the use of personal body parts for identification, and the use of inappropriate activities with the child. **Developmental Levels** Interviewers must be careful to tailor developmentally appropriate activities and in-
interactions for each child with whom they meet. An initial freeplay period provides an opportunity for the interviewer to assess the child’s developmental status (linguistic, cognitive, social, emotional) and subsequently allows him/her to present appropriate interactions. The failure to assess the developmental levels may result in the presentation of concepts and/or language too advanced or too simplistic for the child. When language too advanced for the child is presented, the child may respond in several ways. In an attempt to appease the inquisitive interviewer, the child may become perseverative. For example, when confronted with a mixture of questions, some of which are too advanced, a child may begin to answer repetitively with a response he/she has found to be acceptable by the interviewer. The child may give an appropriate answer to an early, comprehensible question and then use the same response to later difficult questions, especially if the earlier response met with a positive reaction from the interviewer. Another perseverative response is “I don’t know.” In addition to the perseverative response, a child may respond to very advanced questions with a withdrawal from any interaction with the interviewer. Still others may present responses that seem to have no relevance to the allegation, responses which are often inappropriately dismissed without further investigation.

Language is sometimes used which is developmentally too simplistic for the child (e.g., babbletalk). Among the possible reactions is a child’s complete withdrawal. A more common response, however, is the child’s matching of the interviewer’s examples by the child’s demonstration of regressed behavior and speech.

In addition to the developmental level of the language being used, the concepts being presented by the interviewer should be congruent with the child’s developmental status. For example, although it is generally recognized that preschool children are unable to describe an event in terms of specific calendar time, interviewers often insist upon asking these children for specific time identifications. If asked, “When did Uncle Joe touch you?” the child of 4 or 5 years of age would most likely have a great deal of difficulty in naming a specific calendar date. The child’s idea of “when” may be more associated with “when I was asleep” or “before my brother was born” rather than “Sunday, August 15.” Similarly, requiring a child to elaborate correctly the number of times he/she was allegedly abused is also developmentally inappropriate for preschool children and early school-age children who do not have an adult’s concept of number. Because some legal authorities require these questions to be asked of children in order to establish the number of indictable offenses, answers to these questions may be sought. Interviewers should be prepared to defend not doing so and base their arguments on developmental research data and on appellate judicial decisions which have indicated that a specific date of the alleged abuse event is not always necessary with young children.

Use of Physical Cues Touch also plays an important role in a child’s responses to an adult. Touch may imply
communication, affection, discipline, and/or direction. As a result, interviewers should be extremely cautious about touching the children whom they are evaluating. Interviewers should have a legitimate reason for touching a child and should be careful not to touch a child for a reinforcing purpose. One proper indication for an interviewer’s need to touch the child may be to have the child focus his/her attention for a particular purpose, such as a gentle touching of the face as the interviewer says, “Allison, look at me.” On the other hand, touch would be considered inappropriate if the child has just revealed a detail specific to the allegation and the interviewer leans close to the child, strokes his/her head, and states, “You’re talking so well today.” The physical closeness and stroking of the child’s head should be considered as inappropriate as the verbal reinforcement.

Another issue of concern with touching is the child’s possible interpretation of the investigator’s touching as sexual, especially with children who have been abused. Such an interpretation could be hypothesized as a basis for a sexual abuse allegation’s arising during an investigatory mental health contact.

Inappropriate behaviors may also include the interviewer’s posture or the use of personal body parts for identification. Although the interviewer is encouraged to be on the same eye level as the child (e.g., sitting on the floor or in small chairs), care must be taken to avoid unprofessional posture positions. Some examples of inappropriate body positioning include the interviewer’s positioning himself/herself in reclining poses, assuming a lounging position, or sitting in a suggestive or provocative manner (e.g., skirt hiked up). These behaviors of the interviewer promote an atmosphere of physical permissiveness as well as possible seductiveness. It must be realized that the interviewer who has promoted such an atmosphere in which the child feels very free with his/her physical contacts with the interviewer may compound the problem by interpreting the child’s subsequent actions as if they (a) solely originated with the child and/or (b) are based on the child’s experience relative to the allegation. For example, if a child climbs on top of an interviewer who is reclined on the floor, the interviewer must be careful not to interpret the action as the child’s being highly aggressive or sexualized due to abuse. The alternative, and possibly more accurate, explanation for this observed behavior is overstimulation on the part of the investigator. The investigator’s reasoning that the reclining on his/her part merely elicited the child’s underlying aggressive or sexualized emotions is not a valid conclusion.

The use of body parts, either those of the interviewer or of the child, to evaluate the child’s knowledge of anatomy items is generally inappropriate. It should be acknowledged, however, that the child may spontaneously point to his/her own body parts as having been touched by someone or as a means of clarifying the disclosed allegation. The interviewer may also request the child to “show me where you were . . .” after the child had given the information verbally in a spontaneous fashion. This technique may be used for younger chi-
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dren who are unable to describe verbally what has happened and/or have not responded to a formalized doll interview.

**Inappropriate Activities** Interviewers should maintain a conservative and independent approach when interacting with children who are being subjected to an investigatory interview. Having a snack with a child, taking the child to an outside location, or participating in investigatory activities outside of the interview (e.g., attempts to have the child identify locations where the alleged abuse occurred) are problematic interview techniques. All of these activities change the role of the investigatory interviewer. The intimacy of sharing a meal communicates more of a friendship than an investigation. The interviewer's participation in investigatory activities such as location identification raises the serious charge of coercion merely by the interviewer's presence. The presence of the interviewer will be perceived by the child as a demand to produce data. Any activity which may be construed as not maintaining the interviewer's neutral stance should be avoided.

**Materials** Materials to be used in the investigation should be chosen carefully and should further the goals of maintaining the interviewer's independence. Problematic materials may include the use of educational or prevention manuals during the investigatory phase. Such manuals have been designed to instruct children concerning body parts and appropriate touching. Educational materials also convey value judgments concerning touching. They should not be used in investigations as investigations are not instructional exercises but data gathering activities. In contrast, the investigation should seek to elicit the child's feelings and memories about the alleged experience.

Other materials which are problematic include the introduction of photographs or media coverage concerning alleged perpetrators or locations of abuse. The use of these materials severely compromises the independence of the investigator as it changes his/her role from independent data gatherer to appearing to be an agent of the legal authorities. Investigatory interviewers must be alert to any influence the media (e.g., TV, newspaper) reports have had on a child's disclosure. Attempts should be made within the interview to distinguish the child's independent memory of the alleged events from his/her exposure to media events.

**Emotional Qualities**

The degree to which the interviewer's emotional expression permeates the interview can also distort the data concerning the allegation. Expression of both positive and negative emotions on the part of the interviewer may adversely affect the child's communication of his/her experiences. These behaviors may be based on actual feelings and be spontaneously presented to the child, or the interviewer may deliberately display reactions in an effort to explore the child's responses. These emotions may be demonstrated through the voice and/or nonverbal behavioral actions.

**Voice** An overly solicitous voice may be used to convey a demand which is conveyed in a seemingly positive man-
ner. For example, the phrase, “Fred, I’m so very glad you told me about what your Aunt Marie did to you,” creates several problems if spoken in a cloying voice. First, the voice tone and the language inappropriately demonstrate the approval of the content of the child’s statements. Second, such reinforcement may then provide an implicit demand for further production by the child. Third, the interviewer’s tone provides the child with an assessment of the adult’s value judgment concerning the statement. The outcome of such interactions varies according to the child’s characteristics. An overly dependent child may subsequently attempt to please the interviewer by producing further material of the type which had been reinforced. On the other hand, if perceived by the child as spoken in a condescending manner, the subsequent interactions may be impaired by the child’s becoming more resistant to producing further disclosures.

The voice may also be used adversely to reinforce a child’s statement. An example of a negative communication would be when an interviewer asks a child, “Who touched you?” and the child answers “Daddy.” The interviewer then grimaces in disbelief and states, “Really? Are you sure? Wasn’t it Sam you talked about last time?” A more complex example is seen when a negative voice tone is presented with a statement of positive content. In such instances, this may be perceived as aversive to a child. For example, the phrase, “I know you can tell me what happened between you and Doug,” may convey positive content, but if said harshly, several outcomes may result. The child might withdraw; the child may feel compelled to provide data inconsistent with his/her experience, or the child may become oppositional.

Nonverbal Communications An interviewer’s nonverbal actions may also communicate emotions and may well cause reactions in the child which then can distort the child’s disclosures. These nonverbal actions include touching, facial expressions, eye contact, posture, hand gesturing, and body distance. Nonverbal actions may indicate an interviewer’s approval or disapproval of a child’s productions or behaviors as well as specifically indicate aspects of the interviewer’s agenda. The interplay between the interviewer’s nonverbal communications and the child’s subsequent productions and behaviors may result in shaping the child’s material in the direc-

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<td>Inapprop. reward</td>
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<td>Harsh, cold tone.</td>
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The interviewer's agenda.

It should be considered that the interviewer's facial expressions can have a very powerful influence on the subsequent reactions of the child. Whether pleasant or negative, facial expressions convey a value judgment to the child concerning the child's productions. For example, expressions of surprise or disgust on the part of the interviewer may result in the child's withholding further information, in the production of material inconsistent with earlier statements, or in the overdramatization by the child, thus raising questions of the child's possible exaggeration.

Discontinuity

Sudden behavioral changes communicate an emphasis on the material which the child has just presented. For example, the interviewer and child have been playing with a dollhouse, and the child is having the family members perform daily routine activities. The interviewer has been assigned the role of the mother by the child and has been using a "mother" voice during that play. Suddenly the child remarks, "Oh, mother, did you know what Marvin did to me?" The interviewer must be extremely careful to continue the play sequence without a voice change which would have communicated to the child that now she was discussing very important data. These behavioral changes include sudden shifts of posture or an obvious gesture in response to a child's statements.

Summary

The various factors discussed in this paper are summarized in Table 1. We acknowledge that a number of the recommendations presented here are based on direct clinical experience and observation of others' interviews. Much research is still needed to clarify the effect of various factors on the child's interview disclosures. Until the time that

Data Influences

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Figure 1. Influences on the ultimate reporting of the event.
such data are available to clarify these issues, however, those performing investigatory interviews are cautioned to be conservative in their approaches and monitor their behaviors with regard to the children’s reactions.

It must be acknowledged that all interviews will be influenced to some extent by interviewer behaviors. All investigatory interviewers must be vigilant during the interviewing process to minimize the impact of behavioral factors. Critiquing an interviewer’s own work relative to any contaminatory influences must be a continual process.

For a particular evaluation, the interviewer must assess both external and internal influences, as described in Figure 1 and Table 1, which may have contaminated the results. The presence of these influences does not necessarily compromise the case such that it will automatically be dismissed from judicial proceedings. Each case must be independently evaluated for the degree and range of contamination.

References

1. In re J.H., 505 N.E. 2d 1360
2. In the matter of X v. Syme, 714 P. 2d 13
8. State v. D.B.S., 700 P. 2d 630
9. State v. Hoban, 738 S.W. 2d 536
10. State v. Lee, 459 N.E. 2d 910