Individual and Developmental Differences in Suggestibility

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Although suggestibility has been studied for more than a century (e.g. Binet, 1900; Stern, 1910), a resurgence of interest occurred at the end of the last century, prompted in large part by Loftus’ work on misinformation effects in adult memory (e.g. Loftus, 1975; Loftus, Miller, & Burns, 1978). A series of investigations of large-scale sexual abuse allegations such as the McMartin case in California and the Wee Care case in New Jersey shifted the focus of suggestibility research onto child witnesses in the mid-1980s through the 1990s (Ceci & Bruck, 1993, 1995). These cases and the research that ensued forced psychologists to reconceptualize the nature of children’s memory and suggestibility. Thus, the theoretical and forensic importance of this work are responsible, in large part, for it being conducted in such volume.

Findings resulting from the cascade of child witness research have clarified issues regarding the accuracy of eyewitness memory and our understanding of memory processes. In particular, from this research we have gained a better understanding of the interviewing factors and contexts that influence suggestibility (e.g. Bruck & Ceci, 1999; Ceci & Bruck, 1993, 1995). Research has largely focused on understanding how interviewing factors influence suggestibility. For example, children’s suggestibility is generally augmented by factors such as the use of specific or forced-choice questions (e.g. Peterson & Bell, 1996; Peterson & Biggs, 1997), repeated and linguistically complex questioning (e.g. Bruck, Ceci, & Hembrooke, 2002; Carter, Bottoms, & Levine, 1996; Poole & White, 1991), stereotype induction (Leichtman & Ceci, 1995; Lepore & Sesco, 1994), lengthy delays (e.g. Melnyk & Bruck, 2004, experiment 1), cues/props (e.g. Gee & Pipe, 1995; Salmon & Pipe, 1997; Wilson & Pipe, 1989), intimidation (e.g. Carter et al., 1996) reinforcement (e.g. Garven, Wood, & Malpass, 2000), interviewer status (Ceci, Ross, & Toglia, 1987; Tobey & Goodman, 1992), and anatomically detailed dolls (e.g. Bruck, Ceci, & Francoeur, 2000; Bruck, Ceci, Francoeur, & Renick, 1995; DeLoache & Marzolf, 1995). Research with adults indicates that suggestibility is heightened by interviewing factors such as the use of guided imagery (e.g. Garry, Manning, Loftus, & Sherman, 1996; Heaps & Nash, 1999; Hyman & Billings, 1998; Hyman & Pentland, 1996;...
Mazzoni & Memon, 2003; Paddock, Joseph, Chan, Terranova, Manning, & Loftus, 1998), repeated questioning (e.g. Hyman, Husband, & Billings, 1995; Loftus, & Pickrell, 1995; Zaragoza & Lane, 1994), delays (e.g. Belli, Windschitl, McCarthy, & Winfrey, 1992), and the plausibility of the suggestion (e.g. Mazzoni, Loftus, & Kirsch, 2001; Pezdek, Finger, & Hodge, 1997; Read & Bruce, 1984).

Increasingly, however, researchers are shifting focus again to try to understand the factors accounting for individual differences in children’s and adults’ suggestibility. Age differences, for instance, have garnered an extensive amount of research attention. Overall, a consistent finding has been that preschool children seem to be more susceptible to misleading questions than are older children and adults (Ceci & Bruck, 1993, 1995). Yet, even within this general pattern of results, it is clear that age alone is not the only predictor of an individual’s susceptibility to suggestion (e.g. Geddie, Fradin, & Beer, 2000). Indeed, individual differences in suggestibility are pronounced even within a given age group, yet it is unclear whether these differences reflect differences in suggestibility per se, in some other underlying mechanism or mechanisms, or variations in maturation and development.

In terms of the forensic application of suggestibility research, it also has become desirable to evaluate the likelihood of suggestibility in individual cases. As a result, while earlier research focused primarily on differences between age groups in suggestibility, two major themes have emerged in more recent research. The first of these is reflected in research that assesses predictors of suggestibility in children and adults. The second of these is an examination of developmental changes and shifts related to cognitive and social skills. Many researchers now stress the importance of both individual and developmental differences when attempting to understand suggestibility. The goal of this special issue, then, was to collect and present empirical research addressing the issue of individual and developmental differences in suggestibility, a multi-faceted, multi-determined phenomenon.

We believe that this special issue provides an important, diverse, and timely overview of recent research in individual and developmental differences in suggestibility. A 1997 special issue of this journal was devoted to children’s testimony and contained an article by Peter Ornstein, Lynn Baker-Ward, Betty N. Gordon, and Kathy Ann Merritt that provided a framework for understanding children’s memory for medical procedures. Their work went beyond simply describing age differences in memory and suggestibility, and they recommended that other researchers take a more theory-driven approach and consider how a variety of internal and external factors can affect a child’s memory for an event. We are delighted to have Peter Ornstein as our commentator for this issue and feel that the research presented here plays a part in fulfilling that recommendation.

To that end, we are presenting manuscripts addressing internal and external factors in suggestibility from a variety of theoretical perspectives. First, papers exploring individual differences in children’s suggestibility are presented. The explosion of research in this area over the past few years has generated a body of work badly in need of a review and integration. In the first article, Bruck and Melnyk provide a comprehensive review and synthesis of studies on individual differences in children’s suggestibility. Next, Lee examines age, neuropsychological, and social cognitive measures as predictors of individual differences in susceptibility to the misinformation effect. Then, Miles, Powell, and Stokes compare different types of suggestibility scale (i.e. with varying question styles) as predictors of individual children’s suggestibility across different suggestive contexts.

Clark-Stewart, Malloy, and Allhusen, on the other hand, reverse the typical approach to suggestibility in their research. In this study, they apply individual difference predictors to
our understanding of factors that can inoculate a child against suggestion. Hence, beyond stating which children are suggestible, we learn which children are not suggestible. In the next paper, Gilstrap and Papierno point out that suggestibility should be seen as more than a characteristic of an individual and address the novel question of how dyadic interactions produce suggestibility. Finally, Saltzstein, Dias, and Millery broaden this concept even further, discussing suggestibility in the context of moral development. As well, they incorporate an examination of cross-cultural differences in child suggestibility which are of theoretical interest, given the social aspects inherent in suggestive situations.

Although there has been considerable recent interest in children’s suggestibility, researchers are increasingly turning their attention to suggestibility in elderly persons. As such, more research is now being conducted on suggestibility across the lifespan. In this special issue, differences between older and younger adults are first explored by Polczyk, Wesolowska, Gabarczyk, Minakowska, Supska, and Bomba. As with many child witness researchers, these authors relied on standardized measures of suggestibility (i.e. the Gudjonsson Suggestibility Scale, 1989) in their exploration of individual difference predictors underpinning the age related differences in suggestibility. Finally, Mueller-Johnson and Ceci present findings regarding elderly adults’ suggestibility for events in which they were active participants. Using an innovative procedure, these authors demonstrate the relative suggestibility of older adults following their participation in an event that involved bodily touch.

In summary, then, this issue presents suggestibility research broadly conceptualized. It is our hope that the studies presented herein, combined with the insightful commentary provided by Peter A. Ornstein and Holger Elischberger, will provide readers with the inspiration to continue expanding and extending our knowledge and understanding of suggestibility in equally creative and important ways.

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