Factors in investigative communication with children

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Abstract
An important practical area is how to speak to children. The purpose of this paper is to point out some much neglected factors in investigative communication with children studied in small scale studies at Örebro University, conducted by the author and his students. Four basic problems in investigative communication with children are pointed out. Results from sixteen studies are summarized. We have studied the conceptions of children and nursery school teachers of how investigative interviews should be conducted, the occurrence of role behaviors in the interviews, the effects of pressure in interviews, and the influence of psychological factors of the investigator, for instance beliefs, feelings and memory function. As for investigative communication with children much research remains to be done. Interviews with children and investigators, and textual analysis of interviews/tapes are useful methods along with experiments.

Introduction
An important practical area in social work, child custody disputes, police work, child day care, teaching and even research is how to speak to children, especially young children. In an investigative context correct information should be generated and incorrect information should not occur. If incorrect information is generated it might have serious consequences for the child and others concerned, such as wrong decisions in courts or that child abuse can remain undetected.

The purpose of my presentation is to point out some much neglected factors in investigative communication with children studied in small scale studies supervised by myself at Örebro university. I will also make use of my extensive experience as an expert witness in court cases concerning investigative methods and the reliability of statements. My presentation has the form of a short overview of problems and results of our studies and some discussion about them.

What are the basic problems?
According to my field experience and some of our studies there are at least four basic problems in the handling of investigative communication with children.

1. Ignoring or not looking for information or reporting extremely little information from the child is very common in some field contexts. For instance, in Swedish social work child protection investigations and child custody investigations there is scarce or no information received from the child. It also seems to be the rule in both field and research contexts that...
the child is not encouraged to bring issues to the interview agenda nor asked about how he
or she experienced the interviewing.

2. Faulty or questionable communicative methods seem to be the rule in investigative field
contexts. Logic, choice of questions, the formulation of questions or statements and
observed reactions from the investigator are to a large extent incorrect or inappropriate. The
child has little influence on the agenda of the interviews. There are many factual and ethical
problems with preconceptions, cues and pressure concerning what has happened.

3. The documentation of what the child has said is as a rule insufficient and defective - an
exception is video or audio tapes with transcripts from police interrogations. Methods for
choosing statements and for securing the accuracy of quotations and summaries are not
accounted for. Alleged quotations and summaries without account of communicative
context are often shown. The questions used are rarely quoted and seldom summarized.
When questions occasionally are summarized it can often be seen that the investigator has
used presupposing and leading questions in line with his belief. It is, for instance, not
possible to control if answers from the child that contradict the beliefs of the investigator
have been summarized. Most often the summaries are very short and a rather small amount
of what the child said has been summarized. It is well known from research about
memories of conversations that most of the content is forgotten and that many errors and
even false additions occur.

4. Absence of analysis work is common. Relevant contexts are often not made allowance
for. It is often far from clear what the child’s statements mean and it is often not clear
whether a statement from the child has been influenced by the investigator or other adults
or by inappropriate questioning strategies and techniques. Sometimes it is not clear that the
child has understood the purpose of the communication. According to my experience in
Sweden, child psychologists never admit in investigative text that expectations, and
directions and particulars of questioning may have influenced the child’s answers. Critical
thinking around the answers is as a rule neglected.

All the abovementioned basic problems constitute problem behaviors of the investigators,
not of the children. In contrast to these problems research about investigative
communication with children seems to emphasize experimental studies on children’s
behavior and not on investigators’ behavior. Very little research has been conducted on
transcripts of investigative communication in field contexts. Transcripts from police
interrogations have with few exceptions been ignored as research data and other types of
investigative field communication with children within social work and other areas, to my
knowledge, have not been taped and used as research data.

**How would children like investigative conversations to be conducted?**

To get children’s views on investigative communication ought to become an important
research area. We studied 97 nine-year-old children’s ideas about how investigative
interviews should be conducted with written accounts from the children, with the children
showing by play furniture how the room should be furnished, with children’s drawings of
The study showed that children vary in their wishes about how investigative interviews should be conducted. Their wishes vary with gender and personality. Most girls preferred a female investigator and to sit close. Most boys preferred a male investigator and more physical distance. Children with low or moderate social self-assurance tend to want conversation by phone or outdoors. Children with low social self-assurance do not want an authoritarian investigator. It is important that the investigator inspires the child with confidence. The investigator should be kind and listen carefully. The children want to speak to a person they know well and can trust. The physical environment should be well known to the child and they want privacy and a calm atmosphere. The children’s conception of duration of the interview is typically 15 -30 minutes, but the children say that the conversation should continue until the adult understands what the child wants to convey.

These results differ substantially from the routines in police work and social work.

**What are the conceptions about investigative communication of personnel with extensive experience of children?**

Some groups of personnel, such as preschool personnel and teachers, have extensive experience of speaking with many hundreds or thousands of children of different personalities and in more natural environments than the investigative situations. They also follow the same child for long periods of time in varying situations. They have a much broader experience than for instance child psychologists or child psychiatrists, whose experience is more associated with clinical groups and hospital environments. Social workers in Sweden often seem to minimize their contacts with children in their cases. In one of our studies 15 preschool teachers with 8-35 years of experience were interviewed about communication with children. The preschool personnel emphasize the importance of the approach process and that the approach phase should be adapted to the personality of the individual child. A trustful relationship is considered to facilitate rapport. They emphasize that the child should be given time to get used to the person he or she will speak with and that children need varying amount of time for this. They point out that shared activities can give a good ground for communication with the child. They find it appropriate to use open questions and to ask for narratives. All of them sometimes consider it to be difficult to differentiate between fantasy and reality in children’s narratives. They point out that some children have a very lively imagination that can occur in periods and that the fantasies in some cases can become real for the child. All preschool personnel agree that children can be influenced by the way of speaking; for instance, formulation, choice of words and pitch of voice. Most of them are of the opinion that background knowledge of the child influence their way of speaking to him or her.

Some of the personnel claim that one should show that one likes the child or feels love for the child. The preschool teachers judge that the preschool is a suitable place for investigative communication with children because it is a safe place. They suggest special rooms for investigative interviews with children with a more homelike and safe environment and access to activity material. A recommendation from some personnel is
that an investigator should phone the child’s preschool teacher before interviewing the child.

**Are there changes in role behavior for the child and for the investigator in investigative interviewing?**

Inspection of videotaped police interrogations with children shows that both the child and the interrogator go into varying role states, that is sequences of varying duration, where some kind of role behavior is shown. Changes in role behavior can be associated with changes in state of consciousness. It is evident that one should make allowance for the role states of both participants when analyzing the dialogue. For instance, if the interrogator goes into a playing role state and the child follows with a playing role state, statements from the child should not be used as evidence.

In one study, 22 videotaped police interrogations with 10 children, 2-6 years-of-age, and two interrogators were analyzed for the occurrence of different role states. We found eleven categories of role states for the children and eleven categories for the police interrogators. The total number of role states was 402. Mostly, the interrogator led the child into another role state, but sometimes the child led the interrogator. For the children the most common role category was "orderly and/or calm" (31%). It was followed by "wanting to do something else" (10%) and "asking counterquestions" (10%).

For the interrogators, a diverting role state, that is talking about other things, dominated (46%). A directing role state was also rather frequent (36%) and in the third place came a playing role state (5.5%). It is possible that some role states occurred because it was not clear to the child what the purpose of the interview was and what role state was wanted. For instance, the requirement that the answers should be true is, according to my experience, never discussed in the beginning of Swedish police interrogations with children.

The results of this particular study, with only two investigators, cannot be considered representative of the population of police interrogations and according to my experience the occurrence of different role states can differ much between interrogative situations. Investigator behavior seems to be of great importance for the occurrence of role states for the child.

**What are the effects of pressure in investigative communication with children?**

Pressure should be considered as a broader concept than the occurrence of presupposing, leading and repeated questions. Even with correct questions there can exist a considerable amount of pressure on a child in for instance imperative clauses, strength of voice, or discounting of some kinds of answers. According to my experience of police interrogations with children pressure can be very strong and such pressure cannot be used in research experiments for ethical reasons. It seems not to be acknowledged in field work that pressure can lead to wrong answers.

In a study with 16 three-year-old and 16 five-year-old children a short story was played on audio tape for the child who had to tell another person (a female researcher), who had not heard the tape, what he or she had heard. After that a few questions and imperative clauses
of the type "Can you tell more?" or "Try to remember!" were told in a soft female voice - a rather mild pressure, it seems in an adult perspective.

A broad set of unwanted phenomena were generated by the mild pressure. For instance the proportion of correct answers decreased. Errors, mix-ups and made up imaginary answers increased. Uncertainty, latency and silence increased. Decreased strength of voice occurred, but increased strength of voice occurred among above all the three-year-old boys. Irritable behavior occurred, but mostly among the boys. Answer collapses, that is spontaneous change of subject, occurred and mostly among the three-year-olds. Short irrelevant utterances occurred and answers given earlier were repeated. Sentences with incoherent fragments were generated.

The coping patterns most frequent among the three-year-olds were fantasy answers and answer collapses. Among the five-year-olds, increasing silence and resistance with occurrences of increased strength of voice and irritation, were more frequent coping patterns.

In short, this study showed that mild pressure on a neutral memory task has large destructive effects on the quality of information. There were more effects on the three-year-olds.

In another study, transcripts of ten police interrogations with children aged 3-7 years were studied. The questions were categorized into different types and the answers were also categorized. The results showed that questions with high pressure had destructive effects on the answers, for instance in change of answers, incomprehensible answers and answer collapses. Another result was that questions with low pressure gave more new information and that the number of "don’t know"- answers and no answer at all decreased.

In an experimental study with 36 children, we tried to study the effect of giving the children an instruction that should counteract pressure and emphasized correctness of the answers. The results suggested a possible effect, for instance, that the experimental group of children became more careful when speaking.

**What are the effects of the investigator’s knowledge, beliefs and logic?**

According to my experience of transcripts and tapes from police interrogations, it is common with indications of the investigator’s own concepts, presuppositions and expectancies in the text. These indications occur not only in the formulation of questions, but also in the sample of questions and in the investigator’s reactions to the answers.

In one study of transcripts of 87 police interrogations with children, it was shown that the content strategy, that is the choice of questions, was very narrow and one-sided in nearly all interrogations. Evidently the investigators tried to confirm their beliefs. The interviewing was not of the width that could make possible testing of alternative hypotheses.
In a study with 12 simulated investigative interviews with children two students discovered that a number of psychological factors pertaining to themselves had destructive effects on the interviews, for instance that they did not listen to what the child said.

In three interview studies with experienced investigators, mainly from social service offices, the investigators themselves reported hindering factors such as lack of experience or knowledge about the child and preconceived ideas. A central factor also seems to be the degree of value in the investigation that the investigator attributes to the child’s perspective.

**What are the effects of the investigator’s memory?**
The accuracy of the investigator’s memory is an important factor. In two studies on transcripts of police interrogations, we found that the interrogators often make incorrect statements in the dialogues about what the child has said. Sometimes they even assert that the child has said something that they had said themselves.

Another important memory problem is to get correct documentation of the investigative interviews. It is well known from research on the memory of conversations that there occurs extensive forgetting, memory errors and false additions. This has been confirmed for memory of investigative interviews with children in documentation experiments by ourselves and others. There are good reasons to suspect that many particulars in case-books and investigations with alleged statements from children are faulty. The only satisfactory solution to this reliability problem seems to be to tape the interviews and after that be very accurate in summarizing the relevant content.

**What are the effects of the investigator’s emotions?**
In the earlier mentioned interview studies, investigators themselves reported the important influence of the investigator’s own emotions, for instance fear, anger, feeling of powerlessness, inability to think rationally and maternal feelings. An example is the following quotation from one of the studies:

"When there are suspicions that a child has been abused, or suspicions of incest, then I find it difficult to think clearly. Then I think that the child should be taken out of his home and I think only that the parents are persons that want to hurt their child... Thus it is difficult to think rationally or to use one’s knowledge."

It has also become clear in the studies that some investigators are afraid of interviewing children. According to my experience of investigations in the social services and in child custody disputes, Swedish investigators often avoid speaking to the children involved and if they do, the conversations are few and short.

More research is needed concerning the influence of the investigators’ emotions. For instance the quality and errors of investigations conducted by investigators with different emotional reactions could be compared. The investigator’s coping strategies for his emotions should also be studied.
Discussion
Experiences and results from our studies suggest that there are many important, impeding factors in investigative communication with children. Mostly these factors seem to involve the psychology of the adult investigators, questionable interviewing and unreliable documentation methods and children’s low degree of influence on methods and content in the interview. The behaviors of the adult investigators seem to often seriously obstruct investigative communication, for instance by confirmation bias processes or avoidance of relevant issues. Children should not be viewed as small adults that should be tapped for supposed preexisting information. The idea that the tapped information is not shaped or distorted by the investigator’s beliefs and methods - the popular doctrine of zero influence - should be abandoned. Children should not be interrogated in stereotyped ways as with adult criminals. Instead children should be given much more influence on the methods and content, on the choice of investigator and environment, and on the agenda of the investigative interviews. The value of the child’s perspective should be upgraded. One methodological consequence is that we should give children more investigator time than adults and co-operate with children on methods and content in investigative interviewing. This can mean, for instance, that several interviews should be made with a stepwise approach and with use of a funnel model for the interviews starting with broad issues and later becoming more focused.

A general cultural and political attitude change in the direction of giving more influence to children is needed and political attitudes have slowly changed in that direction. This includes giving more power to children in investigative communication.

As for research methods, it seems that not only experiments, but also textual analysis of investigative interviews and videotapes, and interviews with children and investigators could give valuable results for understanding and improving investigative communication. 

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