Forensic Interview Protocols: An Update on the Major Forensic Interview Structures

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Introduction and History

In the early 1980s, when child welfare professionals first started to interview children about sexual abuse, they were flying by the seats of their pants. They relied on their professional training and their intuition. The focus of interviewers was on identifying every child who had been sexually abused. During this time period, there were a number of high-profile, multivictim sexual abuse cases in daycare programs. The case that led to a serious challenge to interview methods was the McMartin Pre-school case (Cheit, 2014). In the interest of transparency, the McMartin interviewers videotaped their interviews, which allowed scrutiny and criticisms of the interview methods. The McMartin case was and continues to be hotly contested, with some believing that leading interview techniques led to false allegations and others believing that sexually abused children did not experience justice.

That said, the McMartin case resulted in concerted attention to interview methods and strategies. This attention ultimately led to the development of a considerable number of forensic interview protocols, structures, and guidelines. Initially, there was only a modest body of research relevant to interviewing children. For example, there was knowledge of normal child development, and there were analogue studies that demonstrated children's strengths and vulnerabilities as reporters of events. There was also clinical knowledge and experience with traumatized children.

The demand for interview structures was also spurred by an appreciation that the mandated investigators of child sexual abuse and other forms of maltreatment were child protection workers and law enforcement investigators. These professionals did not necessarily possess knowledge about child development, the importance of building rapport with children being interviewed, and how to ask open-ended questions. Pioneers in developing interview structures were CornerHouse in Minneapolis, MN; the National Children's Advocacy Center (NCAC) in Huntsville, AL; and the American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children (APSAC), a national, multidisciplinary organization of child maltreatment professionals. These entities developed interview guidance in the late 1980s and early 1990s. NCAC also played a leadership role in the development of other Children's Advocacy Centers (CACs), where children are interviewed by trained interviewers. The National Children's Alliance has now assumed the role of developing CACs, setting standards for accreditation and providing some funding for CACs (National Children's Alliance, 2019).

In the late 1990s, the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) Investigative Interview Protocol emerged (Lamb, Hershkowitz, Orbach, & Esplin, 2008). NICHD developers partnered with frontline agencies, initially in the United States, United Kingdom, and Israel, which allowed NICHD to undertake field research. The NICHD Protocol had the considerable advantage of a solid research infrastructure. In addition to these initiatives, states developed interview structures to be used by mandated investigators.

Current History, Progress, and Challenges

The field of forensic interviewing has been impressively dynamic, with interview protocols evolving and being updated as new knowledge becomes available and experts generate new insights. Current interview structures vary in terms of the degree to which they are scripted versus semistructured, whether they screen for polyvictimization, advice about the use of media, whether they specifically address reluctance to disclose, whether one forensic interview is deemed sufficient, and guidance about the introduction of externally derived information and evidence.

Nevertheless, significant cross-pollination has occurred among the developers of these interview structures. A 2015 Bulletin of the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention entitled "Child Forensic Interviewing: Best Practices," coauthored by representatives of all the major forensic interview structures, recognized the commonalities among these structures (Newlin et al., 2015).

For example, all interview structures recognize the importance of developing and maintaining rapport with the child being interviewed. The interview structures advise specific strategies to develop rapport during the early stage of the interview, such as "Tell me the things you like to do" or "Tell me about your last birthday." The interview structures provide less guidance about how to maintain rapport in the abuse-related part of the interview, when the interviewer is usually asking the child to speak about a painful topic(s), often ones the child avoids thinking and speaking about, because the event was and is traumatic. Moreover, the child frequently has to overcome threats and admonitions from the offender(s) and his or her supporters.

Interview structures advise narrative practice during the rapport-building phase of the interview. That is, engaging the child in a description of a positive or neutral event, using open-ended prompts/questions in order to train the child about the expectation the child should provide a narrative about the maltreatment the child has experienced. Research has demonstrated that narrative practice during the rapport-building part of the interview results in longer responses during the abuse-related part of the interview (Sternberg et al., 1997).

Interview structures stress the importance of providing children with some orientation to the expectations for the forensic interview, since they are very different and arguably contrary to most adult/child conversations. Ordinarily adult/child interactions involve adults doing most of the talking and children providing brief responses. In addition, there is consensus that children should be provided "rules" or "orienting messages." These vary depending upon the interview structure. They might merely entail an instruction to "Tell me what you know, but say you don't if you don't know," "Tell me if you don't understand," and "Correct me if I make a mistake," or there may be more rules. Some interview structures include an exercise to demonstrate the child can define a truth and a lie (Lyon & Saywitz, 1999) and obtain the child's promise to tell the truth. The efficacy of the promise to tell the truth is based upon analogue research, rather than real-world child abuse interviews (Lyon & Dorado, 2008).

Crucial to the success of the interview is the transition from rapport building to the abuse-related part of the interview; the goal of this transition is to both signal to the child the topic of concern and to motivate the child to talk about this topic. Many interview structures use as the transition instructions to the child to "Tell me the reason why you are here." The NICHD protocol provides a series of prompts from "Tell me the reason" to more specific prompts, but without describing the alleged abuse, itself. Interview structures are challenged about how to trigger children who don't know why they are being interviewed. Children who don't know why they are being interviewed and those who have not disclosed abuse remain a challenge as interviewers attempt to employ open-ended prompts.

All interview structures advocate using open-ended prompts/questions to elicit information during the abuse-related part of the interview, although there is not entire agreement on definitions and structure of these probes. In the early days of forensic interviewing, experts preferred "wh-" questions (e.g., Who did this? What did the person do? Where were you? When did this happen? How did you get into the room?) (Carnes, Wilson, Nelson-Gardell, & Orgassa, 2001), in part because the answers to these questions were central to the police investigation. Today, most interview structures advise invitational probes, such as "Tell

me everything you remember" over "wh-" questions for older children because invitations tap free-recall memory. That said, not all "wh-" questions are equal in their productivity (Ahern, Andrews, Stolzenberg, & Lyon, 2018). For example, Ahern and colleagues (2018) found "what" and "how" questions about actions were far more productive than questions such as "What color was the man's shirt?"

Today, most forensic interview structures privilege verbal disclosures over demonstrations of what happened, even though young children may be more accomplished in showing than telling. This preference is a legacy of the anatomical doll controversy. Ironically, in the 1980s, anatomical dolls were the most widely employed type of media by experts in child sexual abuse, endorsed by 92% of 212 respondents in a pioneering study of forensic interview practices (Conte, Sorenson, Fogarty, & Rosa, 1991). The doll controversy was fueled by their use in the McMartin preschool case and by faulty interview uses, specifically forming an opinion about whether or not a child had been sexually abused based merely upon the child's response to the dolls. Although some interview structures endorse the use of media, most admonish interviewers not to introduce media until after a verbal disclosure.

Most interview structures advise a phased interview, beginning with rapport building and ending with closure. How many phases are articulated in between the beginning and the end vary. Scripted interview structures tend to have more phases, whereas semistructured interviews have fewer. A challenge the field has yet to fully address is whether the interviewer should follow the child or the interview structure. Unless the child has been interviewed previously, the child will not know the structure.

There is increasing appreciation in the forensic interview field that some children require more than a single interview (Faller, Cordisco-Steele, & Nelson Gardell, 2010; La Rooy, Katz, Malloy, & Lamb, 2010). Preference for a single interview has historically derived from several concerns. One is very practical, a resource issue. In the child protection and criminal justice fields, staffing resources are already in short supply. If every child had more than one interview, the systems would be overwhelmed. The second reason for

limiting the inquiry to a single interview was a fear that the interviewer "wouldn't take no for an answer" and would use repeated interviews to browbeat the child into saying he or she had been abused, when the child had not. The third concern was that repeated interviews would be traumatic. This concern has its origins in the early practice of each professional who needed knowledge about the abuse conducting his or her separate interview. Today, multidisciplinary teams who can view the child's interview either from behind a one-way mirror or via video recording. This coordination has substantially reduced the number of interviews traumatized children experience.

There is increasing appreciation that abuse disclosure is a process for most children, which may be protracted, painful, and incremental (Alaggia, 2010). Thus, it makes sense that interview structures acknowledge the need for more than a "single chance to tell" for some children (Williams, Nelson-Gardell, Faller, Cordisco-Steele, & Tishelman, 2013).

Articles in this Special Issue

In this special issue on forensic interview structures, APSAC provides articles from leaders in the field of forensic interviewing, documenting updates on forensic interview structures. Interview structures discussed in these articles include the *APSAC Practice Guidelines on Forensic Interviewing in Cases of Suspected Child Abuse* and APSAC Clinics; Recognizing Abuse Disclosures and Responding (RADAR), which includes RADAR, RADAR JR, and FirstCall; the NICHD Revised Investigative Protocol; ChildFirst Interview Protocol and Training Program (formerly Finding Words); The Childhood Trust Child Forensic Interview Protocol and Training; the CornerHouse Forensic Interview Protocol; and the NCAC Pre-school Interview Structure.

Some of the articles describe training programs in forensic interviewing: "The Evolution of The Childhood Trust Child Forensic Interview Training," (Kenniston, this issue). Some describe both forensic interview protocols and training in the protocol use: "APSAC's Approach to Child Forensic Interviews: Learning to Listen" (Toth, this issue); "Why RADAR? Why Now? An Overview of RADAR Child Interview Models" (Everson, Snider, Rodriquez, & Ragsdale, this issue);

"ChildFirst® Forensic Interview Training Program," (Farrell & Vieth, this issue). Others describe the interview protocols themselves: "NICHD: Where We've Been and Where We Are Now" (Stewart & LaRooy, this issue); "A Look Inside The CornerHouse Forensic Interview Protocol™" (Stauffer, this issue). The NCAC article describes how preschoolers and their interviews differ from older children and youth and provides general guidelines about how to interview preschoolers: "Interviewing Preschool Children" (Cordisco Steele, this issue).

Finally, the multidisciplinary team from North Carolina has provided two additional articles. The first, entitled "Taking AIM: Advanced Interview Mapping for Child Forensic Interviewers" (Everson, Snider, & Rodriguez, this issue), addresses the issue of interviewer drift, that is, drifting away from training on interview strategies toward less acceptable interview strategies. Although most forensic interview structures support peer and expert review of interviews, the logistics and practicalities are often obstacles. The authors argue that Advanced Interview Mapping (AIM) provides a relatively simple way for interviewers to map their own interviews to determine if the interview meets the guidelines for an appropriate interview. The second article by authors Everson and Rodriguez is a provocative article, "Why Forensic Balance Should Be Recognized as a Foundational Best Practice Standard: A Commentary on the State of Child Forensic Interviewing" (this issue). They assert that forensic interview structures do not balance sensitivity (detecting children who have been maltreated) with specificity (avoiding designating children who have not been maltreated as maltreated). These authors make a good argument that, despite a brief period in the 1980s, when, for interviewers, sensitivity was more important, both prior to the 1980s and for the last 30 years, specificity has prevailed over sensitivity. The needs of adults accused of sexual abuse have been given more weight than the needs of child victims of sexual abuse. They include in this indictment most current forensic interview structures and protocols.

Conclusion

It is APSAC's sincere hope that this issue of the *Advisor* will both inform readers about the current state of forensic interviewing and generate critical thinking about the forensic interview field. Forensic interviewing must honor children who may have been sexually and physically abused, so they can provide coherent accounts of what have usually been very traumatic experiences. Forensic interviewing also needs to serve the child protection system, which aims to keep children safe from maltreatment, and the criminal justice system, whose goal is bring offenders to justice and protect society from them. These are aspirational goals; the field is certainly not there yet, but the field of forensic interviewing is evolving.

About the Guest Editor

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