

“She Wanted to Know the Full Story”: Children’s Perceptions of Open Versus Closed Questions

Child Maltreatment
1-10
© The Author(s) 2019
Article reuse guidelines:
sagepub.com/journals-permissions
DOI: 10.1177/1077559518821730
journals.sagepub.com/home/cm



Sonja P. Brubacher¹ , Lydia Timms², Martine Powell¹, and Madeleine Bearman¹

Abstract

The current study explored children’s perceptions of open and closed questions in an interview setting. Children aged 7–12 ($n = 83$) years watched a short film and were questioned about it by an interviewer who asked only open questions and an interviewer who asked only closed questions (counterbalanced). A third interviewer subsequently invited perceptions of each interview by asking children to compare the interviews on 10 attributes (e.g., length, perceived interviewer interest). Children’s comparisons on each of the 10 attributes were analyzed quantitatively and their responses to the follow-up questions underwent thematic analysis. Overall, children tended to find closed questions easier than open questions because they required less thought to answer but felt more listened to and better able to give their stories in response to open questions. Their perceptions frequently matched findings in the literature about the utility of open versus closed questions. The research has implications for interviews with child victims.

Keywords

interviewing children, criminal justice, descriptive research, elementary school-age children, experimental/analog studies

There is a growing recognition that children are capable of offering their opinions about a range of important issues within the justice system (e.g., experiences with Child Protective Services, Woolfson, Hefferman, Paul, & Brown, 2010; family law decisions, Birnbaum, Bala, & Cyr, 2011) and that we ought to be inviting these. Soliciting children’s opinions about how aspects of investigative interviews make them feel can inform existing practice to enhance victims’ willingness to engage in the justice system (Woolfson et al., 2010). The use of open questions to elicit a narrative account is one of the defining features of a high-quality, best practice investigative interview (La Rooy et al., 2015; Powell, 2013; Vrij, Hope, & Fisher, 2014). Yet, despite a solid understanding of the objective benefits of open questions in interviews with children, little is known about how young people perceive them. This omission is nontrivial, given that the interview serves as an opportunity (sometimes the first) for victims to provide their accounts in a supportive environment where they are listened to and understood. The current study aimed to address this gap by exploring children’s subjective perceptions of open and closed questions in an interview setting.

Interview Question Types

Open questions rely on recall memory and encourage elaborate responses without dictating the expected content of the

answers, for example, “Tell me everything that happened” and “What else happened?” In contrast, closed questions limit elaboration and specify the desired content of responses (Powell & Snow, 2007). Closed questions comprise a variety of subtypes including yes–no and other forced choice (e.g., “Did your Mom get home late?” “Did you go to the movies in the afternoon or at night?”), which draw on recognition memory and can be answered just by choosing one of the presented or implied options, even when none are correct (e.g., Waterman, Blades, & Spencer, 2001).

Interviewees’ responses to open questions tend to be more accurate and complete than responses to closed questions (see Brown & Lamb, 2015, for a review), and open questioning encourages interviewees to play an active role in giving their accounts (Hoffman, 2007). Open questions are especially

¹ Centre of Investigative Interviewing, Griffith Criminology Institute, Griffith University, Queensland, Australia

² Social Work and Speech Pathology, Curtin University, Bentley, Western Australia, Australia

Corresponding Author:

Sonja P. Brubacher, Centre for Investigative Interviewing, Griffith Criminology Institute, Griffith University, 176 Messines Ridge Road, Mount Gravatt, 4122 Queensland, Australia.

Email: s.brubacher@griffith.edu.au

important in interviews with children because children have a tendency to guess in response to closed (in particular, yes–no and forced choice) questions (Rocha, Marche, & Briere, 2013; Waterman et al., 2001). Interviews with alleged child sexual abuse victims that adhered to a protocol and included a high proportion of open questions have been associated with more favorable legal outcomes (Pipe, Orbach, Lamb, Abbott, & Stewart, 2013). Several decades of research support the conclusion that children are reliable witnesses when their accounts are elicited via open questioning (Brown & Lamb, 2015), but whether children’s perceptions of open questions in interviews align with their observed benefits is unknown. This question is critical from a procedural justice standpoint because it addresses whether children think best practice interviews give them a fair chance to give their accounts.

Eliciting Perceptions of Interview Experience

Several studies have addressed procedural justice concerns by soliciting victims’ perceptions of their experiences in the criminal justice system. Australian data analyzing adolescents’ (and adults’) perceptions have demonstrated interviewees’ desire to be listened to and believed. Powell and Cauchi (2013) questioned 25 victims of sexual assault aged 15–54 years about their experiences reporting their abuse and the services they received. Close to half (42%) of responses were heavily centered on the themes of *being heard*, *taken seriously*, *being valued*, and *being able to share without judgment* from the interviewer (see also Woolfson et al., 2010). These reflections on experience extend to court where 47% of Australian child abuse victims indicated that they would not report again due to their treatment prior to and during the court process (Eastwood & Patton, 2002). In the United States, when asked how they felt following an interview with Child Protective Services, children responded with “very good” (42%), “good” or “a little good” (46%), and “bad” or “very bad” (12%) but were not asked to elaborate (Jenson, Jacobson, Unrau, & Robinson, 1996). A more detailed study in the UK explored the experiences of 14 sexual abuse victims (age 6–18 years) following their investigative interview (Westcott & Davies, 1996). Many children interviewed by Westcott and Davies reported that the interviews felt rushed (see also Eastwood & Patton, 2002; Greeson, Campbell, & Fehler-Cabral, 2014). Further, the children reported difficulties with the number of questions asked, the complexity of the questions, and the level of detail required.

The perceptions of children and adolescents about their experiences in the legal system are likely related, in part, to the types of questions asked during the interviews. Open questions allow the interview to unfold at the child’s pace rather than the interviewer’s, reflect the language already used by the child, and do not specify the information that needs to be reported. Closed questions typically produce quick turns in dialogue; the interviewer asks numerous questions that specify what needs to be reported, require brief responses, and may introduce new language, consequently controlling the speed of the interview (Powell & Snow, 2007). Yet in none of the

studies that elicited perceptions of the interview process were children explicitly asked about their perceptions of various interview questions. As such, it remains an empirical question whether children notice the features of open and closed questions that affect their ability to give information, feel listened to, increase or decrease the pace of the interview, and so on. The present study was designed to address this knowledge gap.

Current Study

Children were interviewed twice about a short film, once by an interviewer who asked only open questions and once by an interviewer who asked only closed questions. A third interviewer subsequently invited children’s perceptions of each interview by asking children to compare the interviews and interviewers on 10 attributes that have been associated with each question type in prior research. For example, children were asked which interview was longer and which interviewer seemed more interested in what they were saying. Children were then invited to explain their reasoning in five follow-up prompts. Children were also asked a broad open question about each interviewer.

We predicted that children would feel more listened to, able to give more information, and perceive interviewers as more interested in their accounts when they were asked open compared to closed questions. In contrast, we expected that they would find closed interviews to be longer and perceive them as containing more questions. We also hypothesized that they would find the closed interview more fun and feel like they answered more questions correctly compared to the open interview because closed questions do not require memory retrieval and effortful processing. As the examination of the qualitative responses was data-driven, we did not make predictions about what themes would emerge.

Method

Participants

Children were recruited from mainstream Year 2, 3, 5, and 6 classrooms at primary schools in a major Australian city. On a scale of 1 (*severe socioeconomic disadvantage*) to 7 (*least disadvantaged*), the schools represented Categories 3 and 4 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011). Children were not invited to participate if identified by their classroom teacher as having language or learning difficulties. Parents consented to their children’s participation, and children assented. The sample consisted of 83 children ranging in age from 7.29 years to 12.57 years ($M = 9.97$, $SD = 1.63$; 28 males). Children in this age range were selected because we expected that they would have the language ability to provide reasoning for their interviewer preferences, and they represent the typical age range observed in field and analogue research on the effects of question type on children’s reports. The university’s Human Research Ethics Committee approved the study.

Table 1. Number of Children Per Counterbalanced Order of Interviewer and Question.

Interview order	Interviewer 1 Asked Closed Questions		Interviewer 2 Asked Closed Questions	
	Year 2 and 3	Year 5 and 6	Year 2 and 3	Year 5 and 6
Open first	8	12	14	9
Closed first	10	9	10	11

Procedure

Children first watched a 2-min film, *The Flowerpot Incident*, concerning a female who accidentally dropped a bucket of water on a man's head while she was watering her potted plants. The film was created based on a six-frame cartoon that has been used in several studies of young people's narrative language competence (e.g., Snow & Powell, 2008). Next, they were interviewed individually about the film in two interviews approximately 7 min each, conducted by two different interviewers. One interview consisted of only closed questions and the other only open questions. Counterbalancing ensured that the spread of children across the order of interview presentation and interviewer was even (see Table 1).

After the two interviews, children engaged in a nonverbal distractor puzzle task, which took approximately 5 min. Next, they were questioned regarding their perceptions of the first two interviews by a third interviewer. While the third interviewer was blind to the children's condition and study hypotheses, the first two interviewers were familiar with the broader literature on child interviewing. They were given a highly specific protocol with regard to their demeanor such that they would behave in exactly the same way regardless of whether they were delivering a closed or open interview. This protocol included specific guidance on verbal and nonverbal behaviors (e.g., smile, nod, open body posture, deliver one rapport statement [e.g., "Nice to meet you"], do not provide affirmation [e.g., "good job"], take minimal notes, conclude with one rapport statement, etc.), such that they had to behave in exactly the same manner regardless of whether they were conducting an open or closed interview.

Prior to the present research, we conducted a pilot study with 24 children aged 7–8 years to determine whether children as young as 7 could be expected to identify differences between two interviewers and explain their thought processes. While three children could not, the remaining 88% were able to do so and provided very similar answers to those observed in the present sample (7 of the 10 themes that were ultimately identified in the current data set were present in the pilot sample).

Open and closed interviews. Both interviews were designed to last for 7 min. The open interview began with the initial invitation, "Start from the beginning and tell me everything that happened in the film," and was then followed by eight more open questions to elicit information about the film (e.g., "What

happened after the man got wet?"). Minimal encouragers (e.g., "Mmm-hmm") were used in between questions to encourage children to elaborate further. As 7 min approached, the final (10th) open question was asked: "What else can you remember?" The closed interview consisted of 40 yes–no questions to maintain a consistent interview length with the open interview. To minimize biased yes responding, half the questions in the closed interview were correctly answered, "no" (e.g., "Did a bird land on the balcony"). The open interview thus also contained questions about several events that did not happen (e.g., "What happened when the bird landed on the balcony?") such that question condition was not confounded with asking about nonpresent details. There were four of these questions in the open interviews (i.e., half of the remaining prompts, not considering the first invitation and the final prompt). In order to rotate the content and dispersion of questions about nonpresent details and to minimize any potential item effects (i.e., some questions about nonpresent details possibly being easier to answer than others), counterbalanced versions of the closed and open interviews were developed and randomly assigned to participants. There were no differences in children's responses to questions about their perceptions of the two interviewers across counterbalanced versions, $F_s \leq 1.04$, $p_s \geq .38$, $\eta_p^2_s \leq .04$.

Perceptions interview. In the final interview, the third interviewer told each child that the first two interviewers were practicing how to talk to children and invited the children to give their feedback on the interviewing and interviewers. Children were initially asked, "Tell me everything about [the first interviewer/the second interviewer]," followed by five questions about their preference for interviewer and five corresponding questions about the interview. The questions were organized around five main topics. Three were informed by literature on children's perceptions of their experiences in the justice system: comfort/enjoyment, feeling heard, and perceptions related to the length of time spent in the interview. The remaining two topics were informed by the question-type literature: amount of information elicited or provided and the accuracy/quality of that information (see Table 2 for questions). The initial Tell question and two questions each about the interviewer and interview included a follow-up prompt to encourage children to elaborate on their reasons for their choice.

Coding

Interviews were audiotaped, and children's responses to the initial prompt and the follow-up questions were transcribed. Children's responses to each of the 10 forced-choice questions were coded as *open* (chose open interview/er), *closed* (chose closed interview/er), or *both* (when children responded, "both" or indicated that they could not choose). If children could not choose between interviewers, they were not asked the follow-up question.

Children's responses to the five qualitative questions were coded with thematic analysis. The questions were: "Tell me

Table 2. Questions to Elicit Children's Perceptions About the Open and Closed Interviews.

Target Topic	Preference for Interviewer	Preference for Interview
Comfort/enjoyment	Which lady did you like better? ^a [Like]	Which interview was more fun? ^a [Fun]
Feeling heard	Which lady seemed most interested in what you were saying? ^a [Interested]	In which interview did you think your answers were most listened to? ^a [Listened]
Amount of information elicited/provided	Which lady asked more questions?	In which interview did you give more information?
Length/time of interview	Which lady did you spend more time with?	Which interview was longer?
Accuracy/quality of information	Which lady was better and finding out what happened?	In which interview did you answer more questions correctly?

Note. ^aIndicates questions for which children were asked to elaborate on their responses (e.g., "Why did you like this lady better?"). For simplicity, the terms in square brackets are used to identify these questions where necessary.

about interviewer 1/2" "Why did you like [chosen interviewer] better?" "Why did [chosen interviewer] seem more interested?" "Why was [chosen interview] more fun?" and "Why did you feel like your answers were more listened to in [chosen interview]?" For ease of reading, we refer to these questions in the article as Tell, Like, Interested, Fun, and Listened, respectively. Through thematic analysis, recurring themes that emerge within the data are identified and reported (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Two of the authors independently coded the qualitative responses into themes and discussed consistencies and inconsistencies to ensure that the themes would capture as much of the data as possible. The authors independently identified the same overarching themes. Following discussion, three themes were collapsed with broader ones because they only represented a few responses. For example, the theme of interview *length* was collapsed with the much more predominant theme of *amount* of questions because the former occurred rarely.

Reliability. Children's responses to the 10 forced-choice questions were coded by one of the authors, and 20% of interviews were randomly double-coded by another author. There was 100% agreement.

Results

Quantitative Data Screening

Five children showed a response bias (three choosing the closed interviewer 90–100% of the time and two choosing the open). Two additional children did not make any selection in response to 50% or more of the questions. Including these

children in analyses, however, made no difference to the findings so they were retained.

To confirm that there were no unanticipated differences as a function of interviewer order, question order, and interviewer question type, we conducted three sets of independent-samples *t* tests (corrected $\alpha = .017$). There were no differences in the number of open, closed, or both responses as a function of question order, $t_s \leq 1.49$, $p_s \geq .14$, Cohen's $d_s \leq .35$; interviewer order, $t_s \leq 1.05$, $p_s \geq .31$, Cohen's $d_s \leq .24$; or as a result of which interviewer asked open (vs. closed) questions, $t_s \leq 2.33$, $p_s \geq .023$, Cohen's $d_s \leq .54$. There were also no age or sex differences in the number of open, closed, and both responses, $t_s \leq 1.88$, $p_s \geq .067$, Cohen's $d_s \leq .44$. These variables are not considered further.

Children's Choices of Open Versus Closed Interviews

We compared the proportion of children selecting the open versus closed interview in response to each of the 10 questions by weighting the cases according to frequency of response and conducting a 2 (response: open, closed) \times 10 (question) χ^2 analysis (Currell, 2015). The overall χ^2 was significant, $\chi^2(1, N = 83) = 103.22$, $p < .001$, Cramer's $V = .32$. *Z* tests were used to assess which questions had significantly different proportions of responses to open and closed questions (see Table 3 for comparisons). As predicted, in response to questions about the interviewer's level of interest and perceptions of being listened to, children were significantly more likely to choose the open interview. In response to the questions about the length of time spent with the interviewer and the length of the interview, children were significantly more likely to choose the closed interview, as hypothesized. Finally, children were more likely to choose the closed interview in response to the question about which interviewer asked more questions but chose the open interview in response to the question concerning which interview elicited more information.

Qualitative Perceptions of the Interviews

Overall, 475 pieces of information were coded into 10 themes, and at least 1 theme was observed in the responses of every child. The frequency of observation of each theme can be found in Table 4, broken down by question (Tell, Like, Interested, Fun, and Listened) and the child's choice of open versus closed interview/er. We next summarize the pertinent findings related to each theme. Additional examples for each theme, organized by choice of interview/er, can be found in Table 5. The quotes provided in the subsequent Results section and Table 5 were drawn from the responses of 38 unique children.

Themes pertaining to questions

Difficulty. Children frequently referred to the questions as being easy or hard or mentioned that they had to think to a greater or lesser extent. For example, a child said that the closed interview was more fun because "The questions were simple, I didn't have to think a lot" (Year 5 male). They

Table 3. Proportion of Responses to Each of the 10 Forced-Choice Questions.

Question	Both ^a	<i>n</i> choosing	% Open	% Closed	Significance
1a. Which lady did you like better?	6	77	44	56	NS
1b. Which lady seemed more interested in what you were saying?	3	80	64	36	*
1c. Which lady asked more questions?	1	82	15	85	*
1d. Which lady did you spend more time with?	3	80	32	68	*
1e. Which lady was better at finding out what happened?	4	79	46	54	NS
2a. Which interview was more fun?	5	78	47	53	NS
2b. In which interview were your answers more listened to?	2	81	57	43	*
2c. In which interview did you give more information?	1	82	74	26	*
2d. Which interview was longer?	1	82	33	67	*
2e. In which interview did you answer more questions correctly?	0	83	48	52	NS

^aIndicates the number of children who were unable to make a choice and are subtracted from the *n* choosing column.

*Indicates a significant comparison between proportion chosen (Bonferroni adjusted *p* values).

spontaneously mentioned difficulty when asked Tell, Like, and Fun questions. There were few mentions of difficulty in response to questions about the interviewer’s Interest or feeling

Listened to. Children tended to say that the open interview was hard and the closed interview was easy.

Amount/length. Responses to all five qualitative questions contained reference to the number of questions asked, usually by saying there were, “a lot of questions,” regardless of interview condition. There were comparatively fewer instances of children spontaneously mentioning interview length. Some responses about amount were idiosyncratic: When describing the closed interview, children only ever said there were numerous questions. When describing the open interview, however, children also frequently said there were many questions. Only four of the children who spontaneously mentioned amount in regard to the open interview said that there were few questions (e.g., “There were fewer questions, so you could explain more” [Year 6 female]).

Question types. In response to the first question asking children to Tell about each interviewer, a surprising number of spontaneous references were made to the types of questions asked. Yes–no questions were almost always referred to as “yes–no,” but there were a few exceptions (e.g., “[The closed interviewer] asked questions like true or false” [Year 5 female]). Open questions, in contrast, were rarely referred to as “open.” Instead, most children described them as “Questions like ‘what happened?’” (Year 2 female).

Speed/pacing. There were only a handful of responses that contained information about the speed and pacing of the questions (or interview), but the theme was raised at least once in response to each question. Children described the closed interview solely as “quick” or “fast,” and all but one child described the open interview as slower or less rushed. A Year 6 male said that the closed interview was more fun because it had “Short questions and short answers.” In contrast, a Year 6 female felt more listened to in the open interview “because there was less questions so I had a bit more time to answer them.”

Table 4. Totals of Observed Themes in Response to Each Qualitative Question.

	1. Tell		2. Like		3. Interested		4. Fun		5. Listened		Total
	Open	Closed	Open	Closed	Open	Closed	Open	Closed	Open	Closed	
Difficulty	7	9	6	15	1	—	10	12	1	2	63
Amount/length	13	13	2	1	5	6	4	8	5	2	59
Question types	28	33	1	—	—	—	—	3	—	1	66
Speed/pacing	3	4	—	2	1	—	—	2	8	—	20
Preference	1	—	5	11	3	—	1	1	1	—	32
Traits/characteristics	26	11	9	12	—	1	5	2	4	2	72
Nonverbal behaviors	2	4	6	9	22	15	—	—	16	4	78
Listened/Interested	1	1	—	—	5	—	—	—	3	2	12
Clarity	8	10	1	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	19
Ability to elicit information	4	—	7	—	4	—	14	—	2	—	31
Naive/needs to know whole story	14	—	—	—	7	—	—	—	2	—	23
Total											475

Note. The symbol (—) indicates no instances of the theme observed.

Table 5. Examples of. Examples of Children's Responses Coded for Each Theme.

	Open Examples	Closed Examples
Themes pertaining to questions		
Difficulty	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • [Fun] It was a bit more easier, there were less words in it and it I understood all of the questions (3M) • [Tell] She asked me for long answers, they were harder, you had to think a lot more (6M) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • [Like] Because her Qs were easier, didn't have to remember as much as with [the open interviewer] (5M)
Amount/length	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • [Listened] Because she asked me less questions (2F) • [Interested] Because she did more questions (2F) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • [Fun] It was just yes and no, not as hard (3M) • [Interested] Because she was asking me questions the whole time (3M) • [Fun] Because I like answering lots of questions (6M)
Types	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • [Like] The questions were lots of open so lots of different answers could come (6F) • [Tell] Questions about more physical stuff like what happened and what they did (5F) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • [Listened] Because she asked more descriptive questions (6F) • [Fun] Because you just had to answer yes or no rather than giving an actual answer (3F)
Speed/pacing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • [Listened] Because they were big questions and they take a long time (6F) • [Interested] Because she went slower (2F) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • [Fun] Because it was quicker questions. You just had to answer yes or no rather than giving an actual answer (3F) • [Like] Because it was quicker (2M)
Preference	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • [Like] Because it was easier to listen to the questions (3M) • [Tell] I enjoy giving, if I basically just say everything to the question, instead of yes or no (6F) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • [Fun] Because the questions were really detailed and a bit hard to understand and I like that (3M) • [Fun] It was very specific and I didn't know the answers so it was fun that way (5F)
Themes pertaining to interview/er		
Traits and characteristics (interviewer or environment)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • [Tell] She did it in a different room (5F) • [Like] I liked her hair (2F) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • [Tell] She was confident (5F) • [Like] She had the same name as my Mom (2F)
Interviewer nonverbal behaviors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • [Interested] Because she smiled the whole way (3F) • [Listened] Because she was looking straight at me (3F) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • [Interested] Because she was nodding her head (2F) • [Listened] Because she was looking at me the whole time and she was making sure she could hear me and stuff (5F)
Clarity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • [Tell] I couldn't hear it that clearly because she was speaking very quiet (3F) • [Tell] She said her questions clearly (6F) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • [Tell] Some of the questions I didn't really understand (3M) • [Tell] She asked the questions clearly and I could understand them (5F)
Ability to elicit information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • [Tell] When you give a full explanation you remember some things from the video as well as when you are talking about it because you are basically telling them about it instead of "yes, no." (6F) • [Like] Her questions helped you with the information because it was all around the event, in depth (6F) • [Fun] Because I got to say everything I remembered (5F) • [Interested] She was getting more answers out of me. She asked more questions about the actual questions. (6F) 	—
Naive/needs to know whole story	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • [Tell] [Open interviewer] wanted me to tell her the story, [closed] just asked me questions (2M) • [Interested] She wanted to know the full story (5M) • [Listened] She wanted to know a bit more about [my answer] afterwards (6M) 	—

Note. Numbers in parentheses refer to the school year (grade) level of respondents, and letters in parentheses refer to the respondent sex.

Preference. Sometimes children responded to the follow-up questions about why they had chosen a particular interviewer (open or closed) by saying they liked her questions better, without referencing any of the other themes pertaining to questions. Frequently, they referred to one set of questions (or interview) as being more "interesting" than the other. Children

tended to give this response to the Like question. Occasionally, children's preferences were indicated by their spontaneous comparisons of the two interview conditions. For example, a Year 3 male said he liked the closed interviewer better "Because I didn't have to say everything, just give what she needed to know," while a Year 6 female chose the open

interviewer in response to the same question because “I don’t really like yes–no questions, I like the ones where I say everything, I tell them in detail and stuff.”

Themes pertaining to interviewer or environment. A number of themes emerged that related to the interviewer or the interviewing environment. These themes included static traits and characteristics and interviewer nonverbal behaviors.

Traits and characteristics. In response to the Tell and Like questions, there were frequent observations in reference to interviewer traits. For example, a Year 2 female said, “She was beautiful,” and a Year 6 female said, “She was nice.” Children also referred to characteristics of the interview environment (e.g., “They had different recorders—iPad and recorder” [Year 2 male]).

Interviewer nonverbal behaviors. Children described a variety of nonverbal behaviors by the interviewers in response to all questions except for the Fun question. In particular, nonverbal behaviors were frequently mentioned in children’s rationales to why they perceived a particular interviewer as being more Interested, and why they felt more Listened to in a particular interview (regardless of whether the interviewer was playing the role of the open or closed interviewer). The vast majority of nonverbal behaviors reported were smiling, nodding, and eye contact. There were seven reports that the interviewer listened well; five in response to the Interest question and two in response to the Tell question (six of these referred to the open interviewer). For example, a Year 5 female contrasted the two interviewers by saying she felt that the open interviewer was more interested “because I said longer things and she was listening, but since there was more questions [the closed interviewer] wasn’t listening much.” In response to the Listen question, five children said the interviewer seemed interested in what they had to say (three referred to the open interviewer). A (different) Year 5 female said that, “They were both listening but I think [the closed interviewer] was just more interested as well.”

Verbal behaviors. There were three additional themes identified that were not observed uniformly. All were related to interviewer verbal behaviors. One theme, clarity, was observed exclusively in response to the Tell question (with one exception). The remaining two themes were observed across all questions but exclusively in responses about the open interviewer.

Clarity. In response to the Tell question, 18 children referred to the clarity of the interviewer’s speech or the clarity of the questions. Seven children described the open interviewer as being clear, and one described the interviewer’s speech as unclear. None of the children commented on the clarity of the open questions. Eight children said that the closed interviewer (6) or her questions (2) were clear, and two said the questions were unclear. Of these latter two, one found the speed of questioning problematic; “She was kind of rushing and I couldn’t hear some of them” (Year 5 female), and one said he did not

understand some of the questions (Year 3 male). One additional child, a Year 3 female, referenced clear speech in response to the Like question.

Ability to elicit information. Across all questions, children talked about how the open interviewer or her questions elicited more information from them or said that these questions allowed them to explain what happened and to feel heard. For example, one Year 6 female said, “She was finding out more about my answer” in response to the Like question. This theme was observed most often in responses to the Fun question (e.g., “Because I can talk and explain” [Year 2 female]; “Because I got to at least answer with what my opinion was instead of saying yes or no” [Year 6 female]). A Year 5 female remarked that the open interviewer seemed more interested in what she was saying because “She asked the questions with what I had answered with.”

Naive/Needs to know the whole story. Some children talked about how the interviewer, “Didn’t know what happened and wants to know” (Year 2 male in response to Interested), or that she needed to know the whole story (e.g., “[The closed interviewer] asked more questions but [the open interviewer] is more interested in the story, ‘tell me the whole entire story’ instead of just if I saw stuff in it” [Year 5 female]). Children used this theme in response to Tell, Interested, and Listened; it did not occur in response to Fun and was observed only once in response to Like by a Year 3 male: “She actually asked me about the entire story; [closed] only asked me about parts of it.”

Discussion

The present study was the first to invite children’s perceptions of open and closed questions asked in an interview setting. Gaining insight into children’s views of specific interview procedures has the potential to enhance the ability of interviewers and those who train them to better engage children in the justice system. The quantitative and qualitative results indicated that 7- to 12-year-old children’s subjective perceptions of the differences between open and closed questions match, to some extent, the objective findings on the effects of those questions found in prior research (e.g., Brown & Lamb, 2015; Hoffman, 2007; Powell & Snow, 2007; Waterman et al., 2001).

When children were asked to make a forced choice between interviewers regarding the 10 attributes, they differed significantly in their choices related to perceived interviewer interest and feeling listened to, their perceptions of the number of questions and amount of information they gave, and the length of time they spent with the interviewer and in the interview. In contrast, the sets of questions about their perceived enjoyment, or liking of the interviewer, and the quality of their responses produced no significant differences. As predicted, a significantly greater proportion of children said that the open interviewer seemed more interested in what they were saying and that they felt their answers were listened to, as compared to the closed interviewer. These novel findings are congruent with research with adolescents and adults asked to reflect on their

experiences being interviewed; when interviews were characterized by many open rather than closed questions, the interviewees' experiences of being heard were improved, likely because open questions give the interviewee more control over the pace and direction of the interview (Hoffman, 2007; Powell & Cauchi, 2013).

Children perceived that the closed interviewer asked them more questions (which she did). This insight may have led to the view that they spent more time with the closed interviewer and that her interview was longer compared to the open interview, even though both interviews were of the same duration. Despite these perceptions about amount and length, there was no difference in their choice of which interviewer was better at finding out what happened. Three quarters of children, however, said they gave more information in the open interview. Children's reflections about the amount of information they provided mirrored objective findings about the value of open questions (Brown & Lamb, 2015). Contrary to prediction, they did not find the closed interview to be more fun than the open one, nor did they perceive differences in their accuracy levels (which may be associated with the very short delay between the film and the interviews). While children's actual performance was not the focus of the current study, we did analyze the amount and accuracy of their responses to the open and closed questions. Consistent with prior literature and children's perceptions, the open-ended interview elicited approximately 3.5 times the information than did the closed interview. Responses were significantly more accurate in the former than the latter, a finding consistent with the literature but not children's perceptions.

Children's Explanations for Their Choices

We sought children's rationales for their choices, and asked them to describe each interviewer in response to a broad open question, to gain further insight into their perceptions of open and closed questions. Research on the use of forced-choice questions with children suggests that, at least up to age 9, children will frequently make guesses even when they do not know the answer (e.g., Waterman et al., 2001), so we did not want to base our findings solely on responses to the 10 forced-choice questions. As previously confirmed by our pilot study and other work that has invited children's perceptions (Westcott & Davies, 1996), children in the present age range were able to give meaningful explanations of their experiences.

The most frequently observed theme was the *interviewers' nonverbal behavior*, such as head nodding, smiling, and eye contact. Children were incredibly astute in their provision of this information: They never used nonverbal behavior to justify why one interview was more fun than another, while they often used it to explain why they perceived being listened to or holding one interviewer's interest compared to the other. Positive interviewers' nonverbal behavior has been linked to lower levels of reluctance and greater numbers of forensically relevant details provided in investigative interviews with 4- to 13-year-old children (Hershkovitz, Lamb, Katz, & Malloy, 2015).

The next most recurrent theme observed was *traits of the interviewer or characteristics of the interview environment*, but children primarily provided this information in response to the broad question, "Tell me about interviewer 1/2." This particular invitation is static rather than dynamic (see Ahern, Stolzenberg, & Lyon, 2015) in that it invites description of a noun (i.e., the interviewer) rather than narrative about an action (e.g., interviewing). As such, it is not surprising that children provided information related to traits and characteristics of the interviewers and their environments in response to this question. Children also used interviewer traits to explain why they liked one interviewer more than the other.

The theme of question (or interview) difficulty arose often; it occurred in response to all qualitative questions but was rare as a rationale for children's Interested and Listened choices. The dominant pattern of responses was that open questions were hard and that closed questions were easy. With regard to the latter, children's answers once again converged with the literature when they said that they did not have to think as hard to answer the closed questions, "You just have to go yes or no." It has long been understood that recognition questions require less effortful processing than do recall questions (Roediger & Butler, 2011). The children's reports of the ease of producing an answer to the closed questions demonstrate that they are aware of the perils of yes-no questions, even though they did not recognize that flippant guesses could be dangerous.

The number of questions asked was observed in response to all qualitative questions but was most pronounced with regard to the broad Tell question. Responses to the Tell question, however, were mostly characterized by interviewer traits and mention of the types of questions she asked. We had not anticipated that so many children would report the interviewers' question types. However, we know anecdotally from our own interviews and those of forensic interviewers with whom we correspond that children get frustrated by being asked the same question stem repetitively (e.g., "Tell me more . . . , tell me more . . . , tell me more . . ."). Perhaps children are quite mindful of question structure, this remains an empirical question.

A small number of observations pointed to elements of open questions that relate to witnesses' abilities to provide information about their memories at their own pace and in a way that makes their accounts feel heard and valued (Eastwood & Patton, 2002; Powell & Cauchi, 2013). Comments on the pacing of the interview related to feeling unhurried during the open interview or feeling rushed during the closed one. Some children justified their choice of (the open) interviewer by saying that her questions allowed them to report what they remembered rather than what the interviewer was specifically seeking. Relatedly, there were 23 observations of children commenting on the open interviewer's desire to know the whole story and/or that, "She didn't know what happened and wanted to know" (Year 2 male).

Limitations

Several limitations of the present research should be noted. While we kept conditions as similar as possible, the inherent

nature of open versus closed questions results in unavoidable differences. Specifically, four of the open questions followed directly from the child's previous response, whereas the closed questions did not. This procedure may have influenced the degree to which children felt listened to when asked open questions in the current study and may contribute to the same perception in actual forensic interviews. However, a high percentage of children also felt listened to in the closed interview despite that questions did not follow from their responses. Secondly, the experimental control that helped us to make conditions as similar as possible lowered the ecological validity of the research. Even though high proportions of closed questions are observed in field interviews (e.g., Powell, Westera, Goodman-Delahunty, & Pichler, 2016), it is likely rare for investigative interviews to be wholly closed ended or open-ended. Nevertheless, the current results should generalize to actual interviews with child victims given that children in the current study felt differentially listened to depending on the questions asked and because their perceptions of the question types generally matched the broader literature. Thirdly, while the initial Tell prompt in the third interview was designed to explore perceptions without constraining responses, subsequent questions may have limited children's responses to the referenced topics (e.g., feeling heard, fun). Yet children's qualitative responses demonstrated their ability to generate numerous topics on which we did not focus their attention (e.g., traits and nonverbal behaviors). Finally, because a major component of the research was eliciting children's rationales for their choices of interviewer, we did not include preschool and early primary school-aged children who might not have been able to explain their rationales. It would be worthwhile for future research to investigate whether at least the forced-choice responses of much younger children match that of the current sample.

Conclusion

There is a broad and international consensus that children offer more complete and accurate accounts when asked open versus closed questions. Best practice interview guidelines stress that the majority of questions in child interviews should be open so that children can offer free narrative accounts of their experiences (La Rooy et al., 2015; Powell & Snow, 2007). The results of the present study also have implications for eliciting narrative information from children and adolescents in other contexts such as education and family law. Overall, 7- to 12-year-olds' perceptions and feelings about different question types bore a strong similarity to objective findings concerning the differential effects of open and closed questions on their memory reports. While many spontaneously reported that they found the closed interview to be easier than the open one, the quantitative and qualitative results also strongly demonstrated that children felt most listened to and perceived the greatest interviewer interest when they were asked open questions.

Authors' Note

Parts of the paper were presented at the Speech Pathology Australia National Conference, the Society for Applied Research in Memory and Cognition, and the international Investigative Interviewing Research Group.

Acknowledgment

The authors are grateful to the children and parents who participated and to Belinda Guadagno for assistance with data collection and analysis for the pilot study.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

ORCID iD

Sonja P. Brubacher  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2422-9913>

References

- Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2011). Census of Population and Housing: Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA), Australia (Cat. 2033.0.55.001). Retrieved from <http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/allprimarymainfeatures/8C5F5BB699A0921CCA258259000BA619>
- Ahern, E. C., Stolzenberg, S. N., & Lyon, T. D. (2015). Do prosecutors use interview instructions or build rapport with child witnesses? *Behavioral Sciences & the Law*, 33, 476–492. doi:10.1002/bsl.2183
- Birbaum, R., Bala, N., & Cyr, F. (2011). Children's experiences with family justice professionals in Ontario and Ohio. *International Journal of Law, Policy and the Family*, 25, 398–422. doi:10.1093/lawfam/ebf014
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3, 77–101. doi:10.1191/1478088706qp063oa
- Brown, D. A., & Lamb, M. E. (2015). Can children be useful witnesses? It depends how they are questioned. *Child Development Perspectives*, 9, 250–255. doi:10.1111/cdep.12142
- Currell, G. (2015). *Scientific data analysis*. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press.
- Eastwood, C. J., & Patton, W. (2002). *The experiences of child complainants of sexual abuse in the criminal justice system*. Canberra, Australia: Criminology Research Council.
- Greeson, M. R., Campbell, R., & Fehler-Cabral, G. (2014). Cold or caring? Adolescent sexual assault victims' perceptions of their interactions with the police. *Violence and Victims*, 29, 636–651. doi:10.1891/0886-6708.VV-D-13-00039
- Hershkowitz, I., Lamb, M. E., Katz, C., & Malloy, L. C. (2015). Does enhanced rapport-building alter the dynamics of investigative interviews with suspected victims of intra-familial abuse? *Journal of Police and Criminal Psychology*, 30, 6–14. doi:10.1007/s11896-013-9136-8

- Hoffmann, E. A. (2007). Open-ended interviews, power, and emotional labor. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 36, 318–346. doi:10.1177/0891241606293134
- Jenson, J. M., Jacobson, M., Unrau, Y., & Robinson, R. L. (1996). Intervention for victims of child sexual abuse: An evaluation of the Children's Advocacy Model. *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal*, 13, 139–156. doi:10.1007/BF01876643
- La Rooy, D., Brubacher, S. P., Aromaki-Stratos, A., Cyr, M., Hershkowitz, I., Korkman, J., . . . Lamb, M. E. (2015). The NICHD Protocol: A review of an internationally-used evidence-based tool for child forensic interviews. *Journal of Criminological Research, Policy, and Practice*, 1, 76–89. doi:10.1108/JCRPP-01-2015-0001
- Pipe, M. E., Orbach, Y., Lamb, M. E., Abbott, C. B., & Stewart, H. (2013). Do case outcomes change when investigative interviewing practices change?. *Psychology, Public Policy, and Law*, 19, 179. doi:10.1037/a0030312
- Powell, M. B. (2013). An overview of current initiatives to improve child witness interviews about sexual abuse. *Current Issues in Criminal Justice* 25711–720. Retrieved from heinonline.org
- Powell, M. B., & Cauchi, R. (2013). Victims' perceptions of a new model of sexual assault investigation adopted by Victoria Police. *Police Practice and Research*, 14, 228–241. doi:10.1080/15614263.2011.641376
- Powell, M. B., & Snow, P. C. (2007). Guide to questioning children during the free-narrative phase of an investigative interview. *Australian Psychologist*, 42, 57–65. doi:10.1080/00050060600976032
- Powell, M. B., Westera, N., Goodman-Delahunty, J., & Pichler, A.-S. (2016). *An evaluation of how evidence is elicited from complainants of child sexual abuse*. Sydney, Australia: Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse. Retrieved from <http://www.childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au>
- Rocha, E. M., Marche, T. A., & Briere, J. L. (2013). The effect of forced-choice questions on children's suggestibility: A comparison of multiple-choice and yes/no questions. *Revue Canadienne des Sciences du Comportement [Canadian Journal of Behavioural Science]*, 45, 1–11. doi:10.1037/a0028507
- Roediger, H. LIII, & Butler, A. C. (2011). The critical role of retrieval practice in long-term retention. *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, 15, 20–27. doi:10.1016/j.tics.2010.09.003
- Snow, P. C., & Powell, M. B. (2008). Oral language competence, social skills and high-risk males: What are juvenile offenders trying to tell us? *Children & Society*, 22, 16–28. doi:10.1111/j.1099-0860.2006.00076.x
- Vrij, A., Hope, L., & Fisher, R. P. (2014). Eliciting reliable information in investigative interviews. *Policy Insights from the Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 1, 129–136. doi:10.1177/2372732214548592
- Waterman, A. H., Blades, M., & Spencer, C. (2001). Interviewing children and adults: The effect of question format on the tendency to speculate. *Applied Cognitive Psychology*, 15, 521–531. doi:10.1002/acp.741
- Westcott, H. L., & Davies, G. M. (1996). Sexually abused children's and young people's perspectives on investigative interviews. *The British Journal of Social Work*, 26, 451–474. doi:10.1093/oxford-journals.bjsw.a011119
- Wolfson, R. C., Heffernan, E., Paul, M., & Brown, M. (2010). Young people's views of the child protection system in Scotland. *British Journal of Social Work*, 40, 2069–2085. doi:10.1093/bjsw/bcp120