

What is source monitoring and what is its relevance

by [Dr. Dan Swerdlow-Freed](#) on October 19, 2018

“*Source monitoring* refers to the set of processes involved in making attributions about the origins of memories, knowledge and beliefs” (Johnson, Hashtroudi, & Lindsay, 1993, (p. 3).

Memory source monitoring addresses the question – how do we know what we know? Is our knowledge based on direct experience or did it originate from another source? (For example, “Did I lock the front door or only imagine locking it?” “Did I see the accident or hear about it from a news report?”)

The frontal lobe is the part of the brain that helps people remember where and how they learned information, and it is the last area to fully mature. Consequently, this causes preschoolers and young children to be vulnerable to make source monitoring errors (i.e., incorrectly identifying the source of their knowledge) and this can undermine their reliability as witnesses.

Incomplete brain development contributes to source monitoring errors

Research shows that preschoolers and young children display cognitive deficits that lead to source monitoring errors. For example, children sometimes tell unreal or incredible stories that contain details which sound sincere (Poole, 2016), carelessly respond “yes” to yes-no questions (Brady, Poole, Warren, & Jones, 1999), and accurately recall information even though they cannot identify where it was learned (Roberts & Blades, 2000). Research indicates that children are capable of accurately describing their experiences when there is no evidence that their reports have been influenced by external sources of information. On the other hand, children’s event reports can be highly inaccurate when they have been directly or indirectly influenced by outside sources (Poole, 2016).

Studies show that young children are vulnerable to source monitoring errors

Gabrielle Principe and her colleagues conducted a series of studies that demonstrated preschool and young children will repeat information they overheard from peers and parents (i.e., rumors) about target events that the child did not directly experience. In one study, (Principe & Ceci, 2002) young children reported *seeing* a target event that they only heard about from another child. In this study, the children did not receive misleading information from adults.

The findings of another study (Principe, Kanaya, Ceci, & Singh, 2006) showed that not only will preschoolers and young children report events that they heard about but did not experience, but their reports will be embellished with details that make the fictitious reports plausible – “... the children who reported seeing the target event produced more elaborate narratives than those who reported only hearing about it. This suggests

that when thoughts or images of a nonexperienced event are recalled with rich details, children might be inclined to regard that event as witnessed rather than as something heard about or imagined” (p. 247).

Another study showed that young children’s memory reports can be adversely influenced by exposure to very limited misleading information from their mother (Poole & Lindsay, 2001). In this study, children experienced a science demonstration and were subsequently read a story by their mothers that included information about activities that did and did not occur during the demonstration, including a fictitious touch event described in a single sentence. When the children were subsequently interviewed, almost 40% of the five-year-olds answered ‘yes’ when asked if they experienced the fictitious touch, and 92% of the five- and six-years-olds who said ‘yes’ to these questions provided details describing touches that never happened. Finally, the youngest subjects, three- to six-year-olds, had difficulty correctly identifying the source of their knowledge about the touches that never happened.

Principe & Schindewolf (2012) identified four reasons that young children are vulnerable to repeating information they overhear from others but do not actually experience, when constructing event reports.

“First, young children’s difficulty keeping track of the source of their memories... Second, young children are somewhat dependent on others to help them figure out how to represent and recount their experiences... Third, younger preschoolers do not yet realize that others can have memories that are false; rather they believe that the mind literally copies experience and that everyone therefore has only true memories... Finally, young children rarely receive feedback on what a false memory feels like” (p. 207).

There is a difference between ‘knowing’ and ‘remembering’

These studies illustrate that there is a difference between ‘knowing’ about an event and having ‘memory’ of an event. Some children who know (i.e., have heard) about an event will talk as if they remember it. Children who accurately report their experiences can provide relevant details about them. However, children who have overheard others talk about an event or who have been exposed to misleading information may also report experiencing an event, and their reports may contain rich details that make the narrative sound plausible.

Finally, as other research has discovered, it is not necessary for children to be exposed to every detail or idea that becomes part of a false report. “Today, it is well known that young children’s error rates soar during interviews when words embedded in focused questions trigger memories acquired from sources other than target events, such as conversations with parents or peers” (Principe, Greenhoot, & Ceci, 2014, cited in Poole, 2016, p. 17).

An understanding of children's vulnerability for source monitoring errors alerts us to the importance of minimizing children's exposure to external sources of information that have the potential to adversely influence their reports. Two ways to achieve this goal are to make sure children do not witness or overhear adults' discussions of alleged events, and to electronically record forensic interviews, thereby reducing the number of times that a child must be questioned.

For more information about this topic or to schedule a consultation appointment, please call Swerdlow-Freed Psychology at 248.539.7777. Our offices are conveniently located at 30600 Northwestern Highway, Suite 210, Farmington Hills, Michigan 48334, and 55 North Pond Drive, Suite 6, Walled Lake, Michigan 48390.

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