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Probing General Routines and Specific Episodes for Decision-Making Purposes in the Family Law Context

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The utility of generic ("what happens") and episodic ("what happened") prompts in eliciting children's reports of their experiences has been considered in previous research, but not within the context of family law interviews. In the current study, 47 children aged 6 to 10 years old were interviewed about what usually happens (generic) and what happened during a particular event (episodic) during aspects of their daily lives. Interview topics were informed by published guidance on family law interviewing. Children's parents judged the accuracy of their reports. Interviews were coded for episodic and generic language use, accuracy, refusals to answer questions, uncertainty, informativeness, number of details provided, and the novelty of information provided across the generic and episodic phases. Recall order (episodic-first, generic-first) was counterbalanced but no effects of order were apparent. As predicted, children responded to interviewer questions with congruent language use. Parents judged generic accounts to be *partially accurate* more frequently, and *inaccurate* less frequently, than episodic accounts. Children said, "I don't remember" and indicated uncertainty more often to episodic than generic questions, but younger children's episodic accounts were more informative than were their generic ones. Conversely, generic accounts contained more total details and more novel details than episodic accounts. Few age differences were observed. The results suggest that there is value in asking children for both generic and episodic information about their daily lives when conducting information-gathering interviews for family law purposes, but that generic prompts may be more productive on the whole.

Public Significance Statement
The results of the present study suggest that there is value in asking children for both generic ("what usually happens") and episodic ("what happened") information about their daily lives when conducting information-gathering interviews for family law purposes, but that generic prompts may be more productive on the whole. This study is the first to consider the effects of episodic versus generic questioning in family law interviews, and provides guidance to professionals who question children in this context.

Keywords: family law, interview, decision making, repeated events, scripts

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The importance of the child interview to family law assessments is gaining stead. In 1986, Keilin and Bloom surveyed mental health professionals working in child custody areas who reported spending approximately 1.6 hr per case conducting the child interview (Keilin & Bloom, 1986). This number had more than doubled to 3.6 hr in Ackerman and Pritzl's (2011) most recent survey. Several experts have suggested that instead of asking children to make choices about their care and living arrangements, interviews should be used to aid the decision-making process by eliciting relevant information from children about their lives (Cashmore & Parkinson, 2009; Crossman, Powell, Principe, & Ceci, 2002; Saywitz, Camparo, & Romanoff, 2010). Interviewers are recommended to ask children about a wide range of topics (e.g., activities, supervision, routines) in order to glean a broad picture of their experiences; in other words, concrete, observable actions rather than subjective desires (Saywitz et al., 2010). A small body of work exists regarding the suggested topics of these interviews (e.g., Ackerman, 2006; Stahl, 2011). Powell and Lancaster (2003) proposed broad recommendations for the process of conducting the child interview in the family law context. Yet, there are no formal, internationally recognized standard procedures or protocols for these interviews, and specific guidelines are lacking (Turoy-Smith, Powell, & Brubacher, in press).

Turoy-Smith and colleagues (in press; see also Crossman et al., 2002; Kuehnle, Greenberg, & Gottlieb, 2004; Powell & Lancaster, 2003; Saywitz et al., 2010) suggested that the literature on forensic interviewing of children should provide a framework for developing guidance in the family law arena. In addition to procedural aspects such as building rapport and establishing ground rules, Turoy-Smith and Powell (2017) recommended interviewers to ask about children's lives using predominantly open-ended questions. Open-ended questions (e.g., "Tell me what happened") rely on recall memory and encourage elaborate responses without dictating the content (Powell & Snow, 2007). These questions tend to elicit longer and more accurate responses than specific questions, and minimize individual differences in interview quality for vulnerable interviewees (Agnew & Powell, 2004). The use of open-ended questions to minimize the risk of erroneous answers is particularly important when interviewing children because of children's greater tendency to guess in response to specific questions (Waterman, Blades, & Spencer, 2001). Open-ended questions in forensic interviews with children are encouraged internationally (Brown & Lamb, 2015; La Rooy et al., 2015).

Open-ended questions should, therefore, comprise a large proportion of the questions asked in family law interviews. Beyond question type, however, interviewers conducting family law assessments may need to consider whether they wish to question children about individual episodes or routine activities.

Considerations About Level of Specificity

In child forensic interviews, particularly those concerning repeated sexual abuse, there has long been an emphasis on prioritizing information about specific episodes of abuse over generic reports of what usually transpires (Lamb, Orbach, Hershkowitz, Esplin, & Horowitz, 2007; Woiwod & Connolly, 2017). This is, in part, because in order for a criminal charge to be laid in numerous jurisdictions, children must provide details about one or more specific episodes (Guadagno, Powell, & Wright, 2006). In contrast, family law assessors are more likely to be interested in children's routines and regular experiences. For example, suggested interview topics include the child's activities, current parenting arrangements, family relationships, and ongoing pertinent issues like substance use and violence (Ackerman, 2006; Fuhrmann & Zibbell, 2011; Saywitz et al., 2010; Stahl, 2011). Thus, the focus of questioning may be quite different with regard to the desired specificity of children's reports.

Recall of repeated experiences tends to be characterized by organized generic representations of, "what usually happens," peppered with specific details from individual episodes. These generic representations are called scripts (Schank & Abelson, 1977), and they become stronger with repetition (Hudson, Fivush, & Kuebli, 1992). Even very young children form scripts after multiple exposures (Bauer & Fivush, 1992). The strength of scripts makes questions about what usually happens relatively easy to answer. Indeed, researchers have found that generic questions tend to elicit more information and fewer refusals (e.g., "don't remember" responses) than episodic questions (Fivush, 1984). The downside of generic memories is that they are inherently less detailed than episodic ones (Schank & Abelson, 1977), so responses to generic questions may be less informative with regard to key details. In the context of learning about a child's home environment, family law assessors may wish to elicit episodic accounts as illuminating examples (e.g., "You said Mom usually cooks dinner, tell me what happened at dinner last night"). This approach, however, comes with a caveat. Individual episodes are difficult to recall and children may struggle to correctly decide which details happened during which occurrence (Powell, Roberts, Ceci, & Hembrooke, 1999; see Brubacher, Powell, & Roberts, 2014, for a review).

Recall Order

Forensic interviewers typically focus on eliciting episodic information at the outset of an interview prior to allowing the child to report generic information because of concerns about confusion of episodic details from one occurrence to another, and due to worry that children's attention will wane over the course of questioning. Yet, several studies and reviews now suggest that there could be benefits to allowing children to report generic information prior to giving episodic accounts if they are inclined to do so (Brubacher et al., 2014; Brubacher, Roberts, & Powell, 2012; Connolly & Gordon, 2014; Hudson & Nelson, 1986; Woiwod & Connolly, 2017).

Two recent experiments demonstrated that children who recalled generic information about a repeated lab event prior to talking about a specific episode reported more information and were no less accurate than children who recalled in the reverse order (Brubacher et al., 2012; Connolly & Gordon, 2014). Hudson and Nelson (1986) questioned children about highly familiar events such as dinnertime routines and, like Brubacher and colleagues, they found that children who were asked generic questions first reported more information in response to the generic questions than children questioned in the reverse order. In contrast, Fivush (1984) asked children about kindergarten routines and what happened in kindergarten on the previous day (order counterbalanced) and found no effects of recall order. However, even by the second day of kindergarten, children had established such strong scripts that they were unable to report even a few episodic details.

In summary, while recalling generic information prior to giving an episodic account does not seem to have negative effects, it remains unclear whether the order of generic and episodic recall affects children's reports for highly familiar events.

Current Study

In the current study, we investigated the utility of generic and episodic questions in inquiring about children's lives. Children were interviewed in a counterbalanced order about what *happens* and what *happened* during aspects of their environments. Responses were coded for episodic and generic language use, informativeness, amount of information provided, refusals to answer questions, uncertainty, and the novelty of information provided across the generic and episodic phases. We also had parents score the accuracy of their children's reports.

Hypotheses

We predicted that generic and episodic reports would both be useful from an information-gathering perspective; we expected each to be superior to the other in certain ways, such that it would be beneficial to obtain both types of information from children. We hypothesized that parents would score episodic accounts as more inaccurate than generic ones, due to children's tendency to confuse details across instances of repeated events. For related reasons, we expected children's responses to episodic questions to be associated with more refusals and more uncertainty than their responses to generic questions. However, we also expected episodic accounts to be more informative than generic accounts. Additionally, because episodic accounts tend to contain specific details, we expected that answers to episodic questions would yield more novel information about children's lives than would answers to generic questions. Children's generic accounts were expected to contain overall more information than their episodic accounts because of the ease with which strong scripts are recalled (Fivush, 1984; Hudson & Nelson, 1986). We did not make predictions about the influence of recall order, given that the findings in the literature have been mixed.

Some age differences were anticipated. Repeated experience minimizes age differences in amount and accuracy for details that are always presented the same way (Powell et al., 1999), but we expected that older children would be more informative and provide, overall, more information than would younger children (Hudson et al., 1992; Hudson & Nelson, 1986).

Method

Participants

Children and their parents were recruited through print and social media advertising in a major Australian city. During recruitment, we employed the exclusion criteria that families could not currently be involved in a separation. The sample comprised 47 children (23 girls and 24 boys) with a mean age of 7.94 years (SD = 1.48) and their participating parents (26 females and 1 male; some were parents of more than one participating child). To test the effects of age, the sample was divided into two age groups: 6- to 7-year-olds (N = 21), and 8- to 10-year-olds (N = 26). Participating parents provided signed consent and children assented to participate. Families received a $20 store voucher for each child that participated. The research was approved by the university's human research ethics committee.

Procedure

Children were interviewed individually at their homes. Parents were not involved in the interview, but may have been within earshot. Children were asked 20 questions about their daily lives but questions were omitted if they did not apply (e.g., one question asked about siblings and was omitted for children who had none). For each topic, children were asked a generic question about their usual routines as well as an episodic question about one particular day; predominantly the *last* time the activity happened (e.g., "What usually happens at dinnertime?" and "What happened at dinnertime last night?"). The questions were asked in blocks (in the same order for all children). Half the children received the generic block first, followed by the episodic block, and half were questioned in the reverse order (see Brubacher et al., 2012 for a similar procedure). Children were told that they could say "pass" if they did not want to answer a question.

Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. The transcripts were then transposed into follow-up questionnaires for participating parents to complete within 1 week of the interview. Parents were asked to categorize each of their children's responses as completely accurate, partially accurate, inaccurate, or unverifiable. Parents were asked to return only the total scores for each category (e.g., total number of accurate responses). This procedure ensured that the research team was not aware of the accuracy of responses to individual questions in order to encourage truthfulness and provide privacy for families. Once parents had returned the questionnaires, all data were deidentified.

Coding

Children's responses to answered questions were first divided into units of information (Brubacher, Roberts, & Powell, 2011). At minimum, units had to contain a verb (e.g., "She folded the clothes"). Units usually contained one or more subjects, but sometimes the subjects were implied. For example, "She folded the clothes, maybe ironed them, and put them away" was coded as three units of information even though the subject only appears once. Units could also contain adjectives, adverbs, and objects (e.g., "[My brother] had a wobbly tooth"). Subjects/objects involved in the same actions were coded as one unit of information (e.g., "Mom, Dad, and I went on the cruise") but subjects/objects involved in different actions were counted as separate units (e.g., "but [sister] stayed with grandma."). The total number of units per question asked was derived for the episodic and generic phases.

Language specificity. Units of information were coded as episodic, generic, or descriptive (Brubacher et al., 2011, 2012). Episodic units typically contained past tense verbs and referred to a specific time period (e.g., "My Mom brought me my lunch"), whereas generic units contained present tense verbs and referred to the script (i.e., what usually happens) without reference to a specific time period (e.g., "I usually pack my lunch the night before"). Information that was not action based (e.g., "My uncle is my Dad's brother") was coded as descriptive. Since most of the prompts delivered to children in the

current study concerned actions (i.e., "What happened," or "What happens"), descriptive responses were infrequent (3% of all units of information) and were not considered further. Proportions were derived by dividing the number of episodic and generic units by the total units for each phase.

Refusals and hedges. Where the child could not recall, did not know the answer, or asked to pass the question, the response was coded as "don't remember", "don't know," or "pass" and these responses were not coded further. Proportions were calculated for each type of refusal by dividing by the number of questions asked. To assess whether children were more likely to express uncertainty in response to episodic than generic questions, each unit of information was coded for whether or not it contained a hedge (e.g., "I think," "maybe," "might," "possibly").

Informativeness. Each unit of information was assessed as to whether or not it contributed to a general understanding of the child's daily life and experiences. In response to "What kind of fun things do you do with Mum/Dad?" an example of an informative response was "Sometimes we play dodgeball all six of us [the whole family]". However, an answer such as "We do fun stuff" in response to the same question was not coded as informative.

Novelty. One of the critical research questions of the study was whether questioning about generic routines and specific episodes yielded new information that would not have been obtained using only one type of question specificity. To test this question, all of the units of information provided by each child in response to each episodic and generic question pair were compared (when both were answered). Units mentioned in response to both the episodic and generic question were coded as nonunique. Units that were only reported during one of the phases were coded as novel. *Any* novel information in a unit rendered the whole unit unique. For example, if a child responded to the generic question about fun activities done with parents by saying, "We go exploring" and to the episodic compliment by saying, "We went exploring *in the woods*," the episodic unit was coded as novel and the generic unit was not.

Reliability

Interviews were coded by the first three authors. Five interviews were used for training purposes and a different five (10%) of the interviews were double coded to ensure interrater reliability. Cohen's kappa was calculated for language specificity and type of refusal. Agreement ranged from .82–1.00. Percentage agreement (number of agreements/number of agreements + disagreements) was used to assess reliability for the division of units of information and the categories of hedges, informativeness, and novelty. Agreement ranged from 80%–100%. All disagreements were resolved through discussion.

Results

Data Preparation and Analytic Plan

We first screened the data for violated assumptions. We expected that the majority of dependent variables (DVs) would be nonnormal because we anticipated that children's responses would be largely congruent in language specificity (e.g., almost exclusively generic in response to generic questions), that they would refuse few questions, and that their responses would be informative. Kolmogorov–Smirnov tests indicated that all DVs were nonnormal except for proportion novel (in both episodic and generic phases). For all nonnormal DVs, we conducted nonparametric tests (Wilcoxon's signed-rank and Mann–Whitney *U*, where appropriate). In only one situation did the results of a nonparametric test differ from the parametric test. For ease of interpretation, we report parametric results everywhere the results were the same.

Although prior research suggested that effects of recall order on children's responses were possible, it was significant in only one analysis ($p = .02$). Therefore, we collapsed across recall order and it was not considered further. All analyses are 2 (age group: 6- to 7-year olds, 8- to 10-year olds) × 2 (phase: generic phase, episodic phase) mixed analyses of variance (ANOVAs), with the latter factor within subjects, unless otherwise specified. Where sphericity was violated, the Greenhouse-Geisser correction was applied. When multiple comparisons were required, we used a corrected alpha level (.05/number of comparisons).

Manipulation check. We verified that generic questions were answered with generic responses and episodic questions with episodic responses. The DVs were the percentage of utterances that were generic and episodic in each phase. There were effects of phase in both analyses, as expected. No other effects were significant, Fs < 1.01, $ps > .32$, η_p^2s $< .02$. On average, children's responses were 95% ($SD = 6\%$) generic when asked generic questions and 5% generic ($SD = 7\%$) when asked episodic questions, $F(1, 45) = 2620.79$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .98$. Similarly, their responses were, on average, 92% ($SD = 9\%$) episodic when asked episodic questions and 2% episodic when asked generic questions ($SD = 3\%$), $F(1, 45) = 2935.18$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .99$.

Inferential Analyses

Parent scores. Three parents did not return the follow-up questionnaire. For the remaining 44 children we compared the percentage of accurate, partially accurate, and inaccurate responses in a 2 (age group) × 2 (phase) × 3 (accuracy) mixed ANOVA, the latter two factors within subjects. We omitted percentage unverifiable from the analyses, as parents scored few of their children's responses as unverifiable ($M = 2\%$, $SD = 4\%$). The analysis revealed main effects of phase, $F(1, 84) = 8.19$, $p = .007$, $\eta_p^2 = .16$ and accuracy, $F(1.29, 70.89) = 219.04$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .84$, which were subsumed by a Phase × Accuracy interaction, $F(1.69, 70.89) = 11.52$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .22$. All other effects were nonsignificant, Fs ≤ 2.93, ps $\geq .07$, η_p^2s $\leq .07$.

To explore the two-way interaction, we conducted three paired-samples *t* tests to compare each type of accuracy score across phases ($\alpha = .017$). Parents' scoring of responses as completely accurate did not differ across phases, $t(43) = 1.77$, $p = .08$, Cohen's $d = 0.27$. On average, parents found most of what their children reported to be completely accurate ($M = 72\%$, $SD = 17\%$). However, they scored a greater percentage of responses as partially accurate in the generic ($M = 25\%$, $SD = 17\%$) than episodic phase ($M = 15\%$, $SD = 11\%$), $t(43) = 3.96$, $p < .001$, Cohen's $d = 0.59$. and a greater percentage of responses as inaccurate in the episodic ($M = 8\%$, $SD = 13\%$) than generic phase ($M = 4\%$, $SD = 5\%$), $t(43) = 2.66$, $p = .01$, Cohen's $d = 0.43$, as predicted.

Refusals. To test the hypothesis that children would refuse more questions when they were posed episodically versus gener-

ically, we conducted a 2 (age group) × 2 (phase) × 3 (refusal type: do not know, do not remember, pass) mixed ANOVA. The analyses revealed main effects of age group, $F(1, 45) = 11.63$, $p = .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .21$ and phase, $F(1, 90) = 81.83$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .65$ which were subsumed by an Age Group × Phase interaction, $F(1, 90) = 10.42$, $p = .002$, $\eta_p^2 = .19$. There was also a Phase × Refusal Type interaction, $F(2, 90) = 11.44$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .20$, and an Age Group × Refusal Type interaction, $F(1.33, 84.70) = 5.05$, $p = .02$, $\eta_p^2 = .10$. No other effects were significant, Fs ≤ 1.42, ps ≥ .25, η_p^2s ≤ .03.

Because our hypothesis was centered around phase differences, we tested the interactions involving phase using paired-samples t tests comparing responses in the episodic to generic phase. For the Age Group × Phase interaction ($\alpha = .025$) there were significant differences across phases for both age groups, but the effect was larger for the younger children, $t(20) = 6.81$, $p < .001$, Cohen's $d = 1.51$ than the older children, $t(26) = 5.50$, $p < .001$, Cohen's $d = 1.34$. Younger children refused a greater proportion of episodic ($M = .10$, $SD = .05$) than generic questions ($M = .05$, $SD = .04$), as did older children ($M_{\text{episodic}} = .04$, $SD = .03$; $M_{\text{generic}} = .02$, $SD = .02$). Regarding the Phase × Refusal Type interaction, we compared each type of refusal across phases in three paired-samples t tests ($\alpha = .017$). The proportion of questions to which children responded don't know and pass did not differ across phases, ts ≤ 1.84, ps ≥ .072, Cohen's ds ≤ 0.41. However, children were significantly more likely to say don't remember in responses to episodic ($M = .10$, $SD = .10$) than generic ($M = .01$, $SD = .03$) questions, $t(46) = 6.58$, $p < .001$, Cohen's $d = 1.59$.

To unpack the Age Group × Refusal Type interaction, we compared each refusal type across age in three independent-samples t tests ($\alpha = .017$). The comparisons for do not know and do not remember were not significant, ts ≤ 1.92, ps ≥ .062, Cohen's ds ≤ 0.50. However, younger children ($M = .10$, $SD = .12$) passed significantly more often than older children ($M = .01$, $SD = .04$), $t(22.90) = 3.25$, $p = .004$, Cohen's $d = 1.08$.

Hedges. To test the prediction that children would indicate more uncertainty when answering episodic versus generic questions, we conducted a 2 × 2 mixed ANOVA. For the number of hedges per prompt, there was a main effect of phase only, $F(1, 45) = 8.25$, $p = .006$, $\eta_p^2 = .16$. On average, children hedged in response to 5% ($SD = 8\%$) of episodic prompts and 2% ($SD = 4\%$) of generic prompts. No other effects were significant, Fs ≤ 1.48, ps ≥ .23, η_p^2s ≤ .03.

Informativeness. To test the hypothesis that episodic accounts would be more informative than generic ones, we conducted Wilcoxon signed-ranks test, which revealed main effects of age group and phase, and a significant interaction. The proportion of episodic units of information coded as informative, $Mdn = .97$, was significantly higher than the proportion of generic units of information coded as informative, $Mdn = .93$, $Z = 2.94$, $p = .003$. A Mann–Whitney test indicated that older children's responses ($Mdn = .96$) were more informative than younger children's ($Mdn = .89$), $U = 126$, $Z = 3.15$, $p = .002$. In order to report the interaction effect, we conducted two Wilcoxon signed-ranks test comparing the proportion of informative responses to episodic versus generic prompts within each age group. The test for the younger children was significant, $Z = 2.45$, $p = .01$. Younger children's responses to episodic prompts ($Mdn = .94$) were more informative than their responses to generic prompts ($Mdn = .88$). Older children's responses to episodic prompts ($Mdn = .97$) however, did not differ in informativeness compared with their responses to generic prompts ($Mdn = .95$), $Z = 1.52$, $p = .12$.

Number of units of information. To test the prediction that children would give more information in response to generic than episodic questions, we conducted a mixed ANOVA on the number of units of information provided per answered question. There was a main effect of phase, $F(1, 45) = 62.76$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .58$. On average, children gave 2.98 ($SD = 1.52$) units of information to generic questions and 2.08 ($SD = 1.25$) units to episodic questions. There was also a main effect of age group, $F(1, 45) = 10.42$, $p = .002$, $\eta_p^2 = .19$. Older children reported more units of information per prompt ($M = 3.05$, $SD = 1.53$) than did younger children ($M = 1.89$, $SD = 0.64$). The interaction was not significant, $F(1, 45) = 1.07$, $p = .31$, $\eta_p^2 = .02$.

Novelty. We conducted a mixed ANOVA to determine whether children reported more novel information in the episodic compared with the generic phase. For proportion of units of information that contained details unique to just one interview phase, there was a main effect of phase, $F(1, 45) = 81.40$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .64$. No other effects were significant, Fs < 1.26, ps ≥ .27, η_p^2s ≤ .03. Contrary to expectation, a greater proportion of responses to generic questions ($M = .77$, $SD = .11$) were unique compared with episodic ($M = .59$, $SD = .15$) responses.

Discussion

To our knowledge, this was the first study to comprehensively compare children's responses to generic and episodic prompts about their home lives. We hypothesized that in comparing the accuracy, rate of refusals and uncertainty, informativeness, amount, and novelty of information provided across recall phases, we would find that episodic and generic prompts had complementary strengths and weaknesses. We found that the younger children's responses to episodic prompts were more informative than their responses to generic prompts. Yet, by most other measures, generic prompts tended to be more effective. As expected, parents rated responses to generic prompts as less inaccurate, and, more often, as partially accurate than responses to episodic prompts. Also as predicted, generic prompts were associated with fewer refusals (don't remember responses, in particular), less uncertainty, and, overall, more units of information than episodic prompts. What was unexpected, however, was that the units of information provided in the generic phase contained more novel details than did the units provided in the episodic phase. We next discuss these findings with regard to the extant literature and implications for family law interviews with children for decision-making purposes.

Comparing Responses to Episodic and Generic Questions

Although parents rated children's responses to generic and episodic prompts as completely accurate equally often, they rated a greater proportion of generic responses as partially accurate and a lower proportion as inaccurate, compared with episodic responses. It is well understood that children struggle to describe individual episodes of repeated events. The most common error that children make with respect to reporting about repeated experiences is to confuse details between occurrences (Brubacher et al.,

2014). It is possible that the responses parents scored as inaccurate were things that really did happen, but children confused the timing of when they occurred.

In conducting interviews for family law purposes, the need to particularize individual episodes with precision is likely less critical than in forensic interviews. For example, if an interviewer wished to gather information about how a child is fed at home and asks, "What did you have for dinner last night?" but the child reports the dinner menu from a different night, the interviewer has accomplished the goal of uncovering information about what the child eats. In future research, it would be worthwhile to have parents report about the types of errors that children made in their responses (e.g., completely made-up details vs. confusions). Asking these questions would give more insight into the types of errors children are likely to make about episodes of highly familiar events.

Because of challenges with describing specific episodes of repeated experiences, we predicted that children would refuse to answer more episodic than generic prompts, and demonstrate more uncertainty when they did answer. Indeed, children said, "I don't remember" and more frequently expressed uncertainty in their responses to episodic as compared with generic prompts. Children's responses to episodic prompts contained more than twice as many hedges as their responses to generic prompts, reflecting difficulty in retrieving memories of specific episodes (Brubacher et al., 2014; Woiwod & Connolly, 2017).

When children did answer episodic prompts, we expected their responses to be more informative than their answers to generic prompts. When people retrieve episodic memories, they mentally travel back in time to reexperience events (Tulving, 2002). This cerebral activity means that a rememberer is more likely to retrieve specific, and sometimes perceptual, details compared with when reporting a script (e.g., visualizing the steaming bowl of spaghetti on the table, smelling the tomato sauce, and hearing Mom clanking cutlery as she pulled it out of the drawer when recalling last night's dinner). Of course, the remembered details may be experienced but mislocalized in time (e.g., the spaghetti dinner was a week ago). We found that responses to episodic prompts were more informative than responses to generic ones, but only for the younger children. The older children's responses were nearly always informative. The interaction may have arisen from younger children's greater tendency to provide broad and ambiguous responses to some generic questions. For example, in response to a question about what happens in the morning before school, some young children's responses contained the unit of information, "wake up." In response to questions about breakfast and dinner routines, some children said they ate "food," "different stuff," or "anything." Sometimes children included the question in their response, such as saying they "do fun stuff" in response to the question about what kinds of fun stuff they do with their parents. All of these responses were coded as uninformative.

Despite that some children provided very broad responses to generic prompts, generic responses contained, on average, more units of information than did episodic ones. This finding is consistent with classic research on the development of children's script and episode memory. Children report more information in response to generic prompts in part because of a tendency to recall what usually happens in a listlike fashion (Fivush, 1984), and because they may include optional and conditional language (Hudson et al., 1992). For example, questions such as, "What do you usually eat for breakfast/dinner?" were often answered with lists of foods, optionals (e.g., "Sometimes I just eat cereal and other times Dad makes a toast"), or conditionals (e.g., "If it's a weekend eggs, if it's a school day cereal"). The episodic compliments of these questions were typically answered with one or two foods. Additionally, it may be easier for children to come up with information to report when given generic prompts because the script provides a structure that they can use to scaffold their reporting (Hudson et al., 1992). Following the scripted structure of steps for what usually happens (e.g., getting ready for school) would mean that it is less likely that the child will leave information out.

Unexpectedly, children's reports in response to generic prompts contained more novel units of information than did their episodic reports. We had predicted the reverse, because responses to episodic questions should contain more specific details. This result is partially inflated by the fact that children provided overall more units of information to generic prompts, so there were more opportunities to provide novel information. It does not, however, fully account for the findings. If children only provided broad category descriptions in response to the generic prompts (e.g., "I get out of bed, get dressed, get ready, eat breakfast, pack my bag") their responses may not be novel in comparison with their episodic accounts (e.g., "I put on my school uniform, ate a bowl of Frosted Flakes, and put my permission form in my bag"). The generic account in this example contained five units of information while the episodic account only contained three, but when comparing the accounts with one another, the episodic response contains three pieces of novel information while the generic account contains none.

Overall, the results show a consistent pattern of better performance by children in response to generic than episodic prompts when discussing highly familiar events. The only place where episodic prompts demonstrated greater benefits for children's reports was in young children's informativeness, possibly due to young children's slightly increased tendency to answer generic questions more vaguely than older children.

Developmental Findings

As expected, older children provided overall more information, while younger children refused to answer questions more often. These results are consistent with developmental literature on children's reports of routine experiences (Hudson et al., 1992). Although there were some age effects, there were only two analyses that revealed interactions between age group and phase, and in the case of children's refusals, the pattern for both age groups was the same but the differences were more pronounced among the younger children. A clear message here is that, on the whole, the differential responses to episodic and generic questioning hold true for children aged 6 to 10 years. Despite the fact that the older children tended to provide more information, children generally reacted in similar ways to the episodic versus generic questioning.

Recall Order Effects (or Lack Thereof)

We made no predictions with regard to the effect of recall order given its mixed findings in the literature, but we had reason to suspect that it would not play a role in the current context. One of

the key differences between studies that found effects of recall order and those that did not was the familiarity of the event (but see Hudson & Nelson, 1986). Fivush (1984) asked children, "What happens . . ." and, "What happened yesterday . . ." at kindergarten, in a counterbalanced order, and did not find effects of recall order. Children were so familiar with what happens at kindergarten (most had previous school experience in the form of preschool) that fewer than half the children reported any episodic details despite receiving episodic prompts. Unlike Fivush's study, children in the current research did report episodic details. Similar to Fivush (1984), however, we probed children for very recent events for which they would have strong scripts. In contrast, Brubacher et al. (2012) and Connolly and Gordon (2014), who both found recall order effects, both used events for which children would have had weaker scripts.

Limitations and Future Directions

For ethical reasons, we did not involve children currently in custody disputes in the present research and we were limited in the nature of questions we could ask about home lives. We tried to mitigate these limitations by asking some questions about negative or unpleasant events like fights with siblings and activities done with parents that were "not so fun." Nevertheless, many similarities have been observed between children's reports of repeated (enjoyable) lab activities and children's accounts of alleged abuse with regard to their responsiveness to episodic and generic prompts (Brubacher et al., 2014). As such, it is reasonable to assume that the findings will generalize to some degree to situations in which children must be asked about negative events at home. Further, it is important to characterize findings from research with children in nonconflict homes, to put into perspective the responses of children involved in disputes.

Implications and Applications

The overall goal of the current study was to compare reports obtained in response with episodic versus generic questions in order to provide guidance to professionals who interview children in family law matters. Whereas we had expected to find that both types of questions would be equally useful in family law-style interviews, there was limited support for the use of episodic questions in this context. Typical episodes of repeated events are much more difficult to recall than are episodes where something unusual took place, because routine episodes become absorbed into the general script of what usually happens (see Hudson et al., 1992, for a review). Conversely, episodic prompts may be valuable after generic prompts have been delivered if interviewers feel that accounts are incomplete. Although statistically less novel than generic accounts, 59% of what children reported in response to episodic prompts was new information that had not previously been reported. In other words, the overlap between the content of episodic and generic accounts was quite small. More work is clearly needed in this area, but extant evidence suggests that generic prompts about children's lives may be the most useful in a family law interview, while episodic prompts may be helpful to garner additional information.

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