

AN INVESTIGATION OF THE LEXICAL DIFFICULTY IN NARRATING THE SEXUAL ABUSE EXPERIENCE BY THE UNDERAGE OCCUPANTS OF A SELECTED SHELTER HOME

Seriaznita Haji Mat Said¹, Raj Ali Zahid Elley², Norsalina Salim³, Sarimah Shamsudin⁴ & Adzlin Nawj⁵

- ¹ (Corresponding author). Senior Lecturer, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia. seriaznita.kl@utm.my
- ² Lecturer, English Language and Literature Department, Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication, Selangor International Islamic University College. rajali@kuis.edu.my
- ³ Officer, Strategic Collaboration Division, Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development. norsalinasalim@yahoo.com.my
- ⁴ Senior Lecturer, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia. ssarimah.kl@utm.my
- ⁵ Senior Lecturer, UTMSPACE, Residensi UTMKL. adzlin@utmpace.edu.my

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Abstract

The research has been inspired by the ratifying of Sexual Offences against Children Bill 2017 by Parliament on 4 April 2017. The bill has been formulated to protect anyone under 18 years of age from sexual abuse, and addresses among others child pornography, sexual harassment and grooming. With the introduction of the bill, it is foreseen that child sexual abuse cases that are on trial could be resolved within a year. This study is anchored in the belief that language and law cannot be separated and due to the grueling court procedure, language is ubiquitous when the victim is pressed to construct from memory the abusive experience. This is the reason personal event narratives – stories that should include relevant details and some evaluative statements that relate to what makes the story worth sharing – are the focus of the present research. Therefore, the objective of this research is to identify the underage sexual victims' lexical problems in producing cohesive and coherent personal event narratives of the abusive experience. The research participants are sexual abuse victims between 12 and 17 years of age who are seeking shelter at a government-initiated welfare home. In depth interviews had been employed and the findings analysed using thematic analysis. It can be surmised from the findings that all victims have indicated no serious lexical challenges but the victims' age and psychology are detrimental factors to the six aspects of personal event narratives, particularly the informativeness criterion.

Keywords: Child, Sexual, Abuse, Language, Narratives.

INTRODUCTION

Every child is a precious gift from Allah Taala entrusted to us adults. Allah Taala says:

﴿لِلَّهِ مُلْكُ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ يَخْلُقُ مَا يَشَاءُ يَهَبُ

لِمَنْ يَشَاءُ إِنَاءً وَيَهَبُ لِمَنْ يَشَاءُ الذُّكُورَ ﴿

Which means, “To Allah ‘alone’ belongs the kingdom of the heavens and the earth. He creates whatever He wills. He blesses whoever He wills with daughters, and blesses whoever He wills with sons” (al-Quran. Al-Shura: 49).

This multidisciplinary research has been a fruit of labour of practitioners in the field of language and children welfare. It is informed by underage victims of sexual abuse and it is hoped that this writing adequately conveys the courage, agency, and resiliency of the victims who voluntarily participated in this study. It is also hoped the findings are both informative and inspiring to those devoted to education and the prevention of child sexual abuse generally.¹

The purpose of this study is to analyse lexical difficulty in the narratives of underage sexual abuse victims from a psycholinguistics standpoint. As posited by Harley (2001), psycholinguists seek to investigate specifically the processes of lexical approach and how things are epitomised which led Garnham, Garrod, and Sanford (2006) to suggest future studies to investigate “the basic processing mechanisms that are employed during natural dialogue.” (p.9). Thus, the objective of this study is to explore underage victim's lexical difficulty in narrating the sexual abuse during legal interviews, with particular emphasis placed on the processing means that reduce children's capacity to provide accurate, detailed, and

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credible (coherent) accounts of their experiences. As such, the micro-level thematic analysis has been conducted on the macro-level scores of the rubric for personal event narratives, a pilot draft proposed by Westby and Martinez (2017). The six criteria explored by the rubric - event sequencing, causal links, reference, informativeness, topic maintenance and high point analysis - are discursive and interact habitually that they converge to produce a personal event narrative.

In this paper, a part of the overall scores of the rubric, specifically under the criterion of “informativeness” will be discussed in breadth within the backdrop of extant literature. Under the subheading of methodology, a description of the research participants who are made up of the underage victims of sexual abuse and interviewers will be provided together with the descriptive analysis of their informativeness according to the personal event narratives rubric developed by Westby and Martinez (2017).

Next, thematic analyses of selected underage sexual abuse victims' verbal accounts of sexual abuse that score the lowest for informativeness criterion in the rubric will be discussed. Although testable hypotheses are not present in this study, emergent themes were theoretically informed by previous work in the field.

CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE DISCLOSURE IN LEGAL LINGUISTIC INTERFACE

In the field of psycholinguistics, language development of children is often discussed interchangeably within two contrasting philosophical views: Rationalists² considered knowledge was innate, whereas empiricists³ maintained that it emerged from experience. Chomskian viewpoint that

² Essentially it is based on the principle that certain fundamental ideas are inherent that language ability is naturally acquired from birth. See works of Plato and Descartes for further elaboration.

³ The ideal behind it is that experience leads to knowledge and that baby is born as a blank slate. This is aligned with the behaviourist's viewpoint such as Piaget. See works of Locke and Hume for further reading.

is rooted in the former finds more resonance with the purpose of the present study. Notable studies on the underage sexual abuse victim's disclosure that is highly regarded as the vital element in prosecution due to the absence of corroborating evidence generally reflect the rationalists' perspectives (Azzopardi et al. 2019; Miragoli, Camisasca, and Di Blasio 2017; Snow, Powell, and Sanger 2012; Teoh and Lamb 2010).

The belief that purposeful disclosure of sexual abuse by some victims can be hindered by developmental, socioemotional, interpersonal, and contextual barriers had motivated the study by Azzopardi et al. (2019). After reviewing previous studies on children's accounts of sexual abuse, Azzopardi et al. (2019) concluded that forensic interviewing protocols could only illicit disclosure of abuse from less than half of confirmed child victims.

These findings suggest that, for some children, there are persuasive barriers to narrating the experience. Earlier works by Miragoli et al. (2017), Snow et al. (2012) and Teoh and Lamb (2010) share similar sentiment whereby they identified the underage victims' cognitive and socio-cognitive skills could jeopardize the victims' narrative. So much so that the quality of the victim's narrative is not evaluated for its accuracy but for its informativeness (Teoh and Lamb 2010).

As identified by Azzopardi et al. (2019) through their meta analysis of the findings, underage sexual victims' shorter attention spans and lack of complex linguistics flair as well as memory encoding and retrieval skills may impede "their ability to provide clear, consistent, and sufficiently detailed disclosure statements that meet the threshold for substantiation and prosecution." (p. 298).

Some of the recommendations that this study had offered that were applied for the methodology of the present study particularly, are the use of open-ended prompts and cued invitations during the interview. According to Azzopardi et al. (2019) this practice promotes free recollection and protects interviewees against manipulation strategies.

In a similar vein, the study by Miragoli et al. (2017) is pertinent to the present study due to its investigations of the potential obstacles associated with child victims' cognitive development. As the goal of their research was to assess the effects of age and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) on the narrative disintegration in memories, Miragoli et al. (2017) had informed a few of the emergent themes for the thematic analysis of underage victims' lexical difficulty in narrating the sexual abuse.

Aligned with the findings made by Azzopardi et al. (2019), Snow et al. (2012) and Teoh and Lamb (2010), age was proven to hold the key in establishing narrative coherence and to foresee the level of proclivity, the sequence of incidents and the level of assessment of the event (Miragoli et al. 2017).

In addition, the findings pointed out that PTSD was related to narrative coherence and cohesion that in understanding the effects of PTSD on child victims, the narrative fragmentation could be considered as a useful analytical tool. Miragoli et al. (2017) also posited that in a legal context the traumatic effects of PTSD on the narrative coherence and cohesion could be noteworthy indicators in the evaluation of child testimony.

The effects of PTSD are not directly addressed by the rubric for scoring personal event narratives but the criterion "informativeness", which is one of the precursors to thematic coherence and the focus of the present study, is outlined by Westby and Martinez (2017) to adhere to Grice's maxims (Grice 1975).

Grice's maxims (Grice 1975) require truth-telling; providing "just enough information"; and offering only the information that is applicable to the narrative (Westby and Martinez 2017). Whereas literature review by Miragoli et al. (2017) revealed the effects of PTSD that influence the victim's narrative include heightened sensory mechanisms (Hopper & van der Kolk 2001), abnormal chronology (Byrne, Hyman & Scott 2001), and memory confusion (Foa, Molnar & Cashman 1995; Halligan, Clark, & Ehlers 2002). These are some aspects that should be taken into

consideration in future upgrading of the pilot rubric.

Snow et al. (2012) had highlighted the demand of oral language competence of not only the young victims but also the witnesses and offenders who find themselves overwhelmed by the legal system interface. The study had raised the issue of inequality of either biological or psychosocial provisions of this particular demography and offered the alternative to nature vs nurture argument which is attachment theory (see Cassidy 2008).

Cognitive development of an infant is reliant on experience and Snow et al. (2012) argued that at crucial stages, the infant must have intense and recurrent interactive experiences both of safe and amiable attachment and of language usage. Without these experiences, a child's cognitive, psychosocial, and academic development are considered disadvantaged. Fulfilling the informativeness criterion in narrating the traumatic experience will be cumbersome to these youngsters that Snow et al. (2012) suggested scaffolding by the interviewers to increase opportunities for the interviewees to give a reliable account of the event.

Nonetheless, studies reviewed by Snow et al. (2012) indicated that these children when pressured to give very specific details are more likely to construct or tolerate false details, under the probable pretext of wanting to appear capable or to terminate the interview. This findings had contributed to several emergent themes for the thematic analysis of the current study.

The practice of the Malaysian police interviews with children was the focus of the study by Teoh and Lamb (2010) who believed that rapport-building phase if done right could benefit the parties involved. What makes this study stand out is that during this rapport-building phase, "evaluation" was devoted to assessing children's grasping the difference between truth-telling and lying by sharing a brief fictitious story, and their perception of the religious morality of dishonesty.

Truth-telling is very much related to Grice's maxims that were adopted by Westby and Martinez (2017) for the criterion "informativeness". Although a

sample of the fictitious tale was not described, Teoh and Lamb (2010) deduced that this component of the rapport-building phase had attributed to the youngsters' informativeness during the interview. Another interesting finding from this study is the sociocultural aspects which subsume religious and community conventions have some influence on the victims' informativeness.

Teoh and Lamb (2010) described the Malays' "strong sense of community spirit" (p.155) ironically protects the offenders because young victims are suppressed from unveiling the offences committed by especially male family or community members. Therefore, sociocultural perspective could be deemed as an element that influences the victim's informativeness in forensic interview.

METHODOLOGY

The rubric proposed by Westby and Martinez (2017) was adopted for this research because it examined the relationships between the characteristics that contribute to a cohesive personal event narrative in line with the forensic interview assessments.

Personal event narratives are defined by Westby and Martinez (2017) as stories a person creates from memory about an experienced event. What makes the story worth disclosing are the significant details and some evaluative statements that link to it (Westby and Martinez 2017).

According to Miragoli, et al. (2017), forensic interviews are conducted with the aim of launching a criminal investigation into the sexual abuse charges. Hence, forensic interviews are essentially interactions distinguished by turn-taking exchanges (Westby and Martinez 2017).

Personal narratives are critical during the forensic interview because interviewers make sexual abuse evaluations based exclusively on what the underage victim is able to narrate (Miragoli et al. 2017; Snow et al. 2012; Teoh and Lamb 2010; Westby and Martinez 2017).

Therefore, the current study adopted the personal event narrative rubric due to its commendable range of scoring set

to Grice's maxims (Grice 1975) that a personal narrative should not contain false information; provide adequate information and that these elements should be observed during the interview.

The points to be awarded are as follows: informants obtain a '0' if they do not offer any information pertaining to the event; a '1' if they provide just a rough outline, omitting crucial content; a '2' for presenting the essentials but laced with irrelevant information; a '3' for a narrative with essential facts with little unnecessary information; a '4' for content containing all the essentials and details; and a '5' for one as the preceding criterion but with elaboration and some evaluation of the event.

Next, the composite narratives that scored the lowest for the "informativeness" criterion were analysed using the discourse analysis approach. Code mapping was done manually to produce a selected list of categories, and then the central themes of the study (Vaismoradi, Jones, Turunen and Snelgrove 2016).

PARTICIPANTS

The study analyzed the personal event narratives within a group of 28 Malaysian underage victims of sexual abuse and were involved in legal interface which either concluded in the conviction or non conviction of the accused.

At the time of the deposition, the mean age of the victims (n = 28 female) was 16 years (range: 13–17 years): 50% of children (n = 14) were schooling aged (12–16 years old), 50% (n = 14) were attending vocational training (15–17 years old) where they learn basic skills of tailoring and baking as well as practical and theoretical knowledge in beauty services.

At the time of field study, researchers had not been informed of the children's cognitive level. Nonetheless, at then end of data collection process, it was summed up that all the informants were considered to have average intelligence, no obvious signs of mental retardation and/or of learning disabilities.

The profile of the underage sexual abuse victims was derived from the legal documentation of the shelter home, and it

comprised of the most minimal background information to protect the privacy of the participating occupants.

PROCEDURE

All interviews in the current study were conducted by two female interviewers of Malay ethnicity and one male interviewer of Bengali ethnicity respectively. Since all interviewees were comfortable speaking in Malay, every interview was conducted in Malay.

Because all the interviewers were proficient in the Malay language, interviewer ethnic differences were not considered as determining factors in data analysis. One of the interviewers was a skilled personnel trained in evaluating the cases of child sexual abuse, and she imparted her experience to the other two interviewers before the interviewing session commenced.

Consistent with the literature, each interview was collected through a semi-structured protocol divided into four phases (relationship building, free narrative, questioning, and closure), audio-recorded, and transcribed verbatim.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In the present study which utilizes the personal event narratives rubric (Westby and Martinez 2017), it is found that four (4) participants obtained the full '5' points on informativeness. They were able to narrate well, providing all the essentials with elaboration. Three (3) participants scored '4' points and nine (9), the majority, were awarded '3' points, marking the average.

The lowest scores of '2' and '1' were given to four (4) and two (2) participants respectively. The remaining six (6) were considered irrelevant as they do not fulfil the criterion of being attacked sexually. The group which is analysed for this study is those who obtained both '1' and '2' points, indicating narratives of poor informativeness.

The first participant selected from the lowest scoring group is one given the pseudonym Biah and coded V17. She scored the lowest in the criterion of informativeness and provided a good

example of how PTSD manifest in a victim's disclosure (Miragoli et al., 2017).

Perhaps being questioned on private matters by a male interviewer had raised her anxiety and she began answering using single-worded or minimum-phrase responses. She also had the tendency to use gap fillers and other guttural sounds at the beginning of the interview. Once the interviewer managed to win her trust and coax her into comfort, she began expressing herself as she recalled incidents.

Code: V17	Age: 17
Excerpt: 'Time tu mak angkat saya kata dia nak letak saya kat asrama. Kalau dia ada duit. Saya kata saya tak nak pun benda tu semua. Saya nak duduk dengan family saya. Saya tak nak orang jaga saya saya tak nak menyusahkan orang. Nanti kalau saya menyusahkan orang saya tak tahu nak balas budi orang'	
Score: Informativeness – 2	
Analysis: 1. Vague details of the experience – Who was the adopted mother [mak angkat]? What was the thing [benda] V17 referring to? Who are the people [orang] V17 was talking about?	

In her narrative, there is the tendency for short bursts of emotional expressions where she expressed her unwillingness to live with any other people besides her family, and she associated this with owing favours. This practice is very much anchored in the sociocultural aspects of the society the victim belongs to as implied by Teoh and Lamb (2010). The victims also displayed obvious biological or psychosocial challenge as outlined by Snow et al. (2012) that was indicated by the reiteration of her stand.

Code: V17	Age: 17
Excerpt: 'Pastu saya cakap mak saya, saya nak duduk dengan mak saya. Saya tak nak duduk dengan sesiapa pun. Saya nak sama-sama susah sama-sama senang dengan dia'	
Score: Informativeness – 2	
Analysis: 1. Vague details of the experience – Who	

else was V17 referring to beside her mother [mak]?
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Almost immediately her focus shifted to her mother's response, an abnormal chronology that reflects the effects of PTSD (Miragoli et al., 2017) and can threaten evidence and hearing of a sexual abuse case (Azzopardi et al. 2019).

Code: V17	Age: 17
Excerpt: 'Pastu ibu marah saya, marah kakak angkat dia. Pastu saya lari lah gi rumah nenek. Rumah nenek dengan rumah ibu dekat. Pastu saya duduk dalam sebulan lebih jugak lah'	
Score: Informativeness – 2	
Analysis: 1. Vague details of the experience – Who is the mother's adopted sister [kakak angkat dia]? What is her significance in the narrative? 2. No explicit report of her feelings about the event of running away from her mother	

In a hurried sequence, or the lack of it, she conveyed her mother's berating, introduced two new people in the discourse, and described both the geographical and temporal connection into the narrative. This immediately shifted to the mentioning of the attacker in an abrupt manner:

Code: V17	Age: 17
Excerpt: 'Pastu semenjak arwah atuk meninggal, erm..... time tu sebelum arwah atuk meninggal, pak cik ni dah kahwin dengan mak cik. Lepastu..semenjak tu, dia kacau saya setiap malam. Hari ni dia kerja esok dia cuti'	
Score: Informativeness – 2	
Analysis: 1. No explicit report of her feelings about the abusive experience and perpetrator 2. Vague details of the experience – What type of abuse [kacau] took place? What is the timeline [semenjak tu] of the abuse?	

At this point, her narration seemed to be guided by her recollection of the happenings. She began to speak of the time when the grandfather had passed away, but immediately provided the corrected time frame of when he was alive, to introduce the victimising uncle, as well as the gravity of the attacks. But there was a sudden change in direction as she recalled his schedule, consistent with memory confusion highlighted by Miragoli et al. (2017).

V17 further corroborated the irrelevant information of thoughts that occurred to her at the time of the event as conveyed by her narrative:

Code: V17	Age: 17
Excerpt: <i>'Lepastu saya akan tanya mak cik saya, jadual achik macam mana, bila dia kerja bila dia cuti? Hari ni dia kerja esok dia cuti. Ouh nak kena pakai seluar. Kalau pakai seluar pun sama kena'</i>	
Score: Informativeness – 2	
Analysis: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What is the relevancy to wearing pants [seluar] with the uncle's work schedule? 2. Vague details of the experience – What did V17 mean by the same circumstance [sama kena]? 	

Here, while she narrated about her asking the uncle's schedule, she suddenly responded to the absent suggestion that she should wear pants for security, and she went on to answer that even with pants, she was still attacked. Clearly the effects of PTSD (Miragoli at al. 2017) had caused her, in a split second, to be subconsciously transported to the event that the last statement indicated her frustration at herself for not being able to fend for her dignity.

Informant coded V17 obtained a '2', suggesting that she lacks informativeness, as her narrative seemed to be muddled, and even a listener or user of the same language may find difficulty in following her story or getting valid and solid information from her. Her shift from reported to direct speech form may contribute to this. As an example:

Code: V17	Age: 17
Excerpt: <i>'Sebab dia jaga saya daripada kecik sampai ke besar. Lepastu saya jaga dia, ayah kata kakak, kakak jagalah dia abang kau tak nak jaga dia. Nak pergi mana ayah? Adalah kau ikut je'</i>	
Score: Informativeness – 2	
Analysis: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Why did V17 resort to role play in the narrative? 2. Vague details of the experience – Who was the third person [dia] in the narrative? Why was V17 asking about the father's [ayah] whereabouts? What was the relevancy of the father's whereabouts with the third person [dia]? 	

Contained in this speech is her reasoning why she chose to care for her mother, followed by her father's direct instruction, a direct question to her father, and the father's answer. V17 had taken multiple roles in this discourse and it could be an indicator that she had had disjointed and too few experiences of safe and friendly relationship and language usage (Snow et al., 2012).

Besides the inability to provide clear information, the next victim, coded V1 also displayed poor informativeness due to faulty memory, as well as language construction even in the vernacular which is reflective of PTSD (Miragoli et al., 2017). When asked how she arrived at the facility, she answered, *'Datang sini kakak hantar dekat hostel.'*

Structurally, the sentence is vague. Fourteen-year-old V1 could not provide clearly the actual time of her abuse incident. When asked if she remembered when it happened, V1 indicated that she did not remember by shaking her head. In the attempt to urge her to answer, the initial question was reworded and sought the duration of her stay at the shelter. V1 showed some confusion and answered, *'beberapa har...i'* (verbatim indicating hesitation).

The interviewer tried to clarify by asking her the year, to which she replied correctly by mentioning the previous year.

To reaffirm her response, the question was asked again, to which V1 answered that she had been in the shelter for a long time.

At that point of the interview, the researcher felt that the V1 seemed to be struggling with the holistic view of the situation. Informant coded V1 seemed to have shelved the memory of the alleged attacks, and revealed them only when necessary. This can be evidenced by her response to the question on the attacker's appearance.

Code: V1	Age: 14
Excerpt: <i>'Dah tua dah. Dia kawan dengan kakak. Kakak **** yang buat reprot. Dia yang hantar dekat hospital. Dia hantar kat balai polis'</i>	
Score: Informativeness – 1	
Analysis: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Vague details of the experience – No estimation of the age of the perpetrator [<i>Dah tua dah</i>], no essential details about the hospital and police station [<i>balai polis</i>] 2. No explicit report of her feelings about the abusive experience and perpetrator 	

Her focus seemed to be clearer when she began speaking of her sister – the more 'friendly' character in her memory. But V1 fumbled again when describing the locations of her ordeal.

The following informant, V4 was given a score of '1' for "informativeness", as she admitted to lying to the authorities about being molested by her father. Her relationship with the actual perpetrator, an Indian man, was revealed during the later part of the interview. V4, 17 years of age is a good example of how age was proven to hold the key in establishing narrative coherence (Azzopardi et al. 2019; Miragoli, Camisasca, and Di Blasio 2017; Snow, Powell, and Sanger 2012; Teoh and Lamb 2010).

With her age and experience, V4 displayed her ability to foresee the level of proclivity, the sequence of incidents and the level of assessment of the event (Miragoli et al. 2017) and used it to her advantage. V4 started most of her statements by feigning forgetfulness. But when nudged towards an

answer, she conveniently 'remembers' it. An example of this is when she was asked about her father. V4 responded by saying, *'Ayah.. dia ikut mak tiri tu pergi mana entah. Mama kata ayah dah takde kat rumah dah.'* Her discourse was not only lacking in essential details but also riddled with unnecessary information, such as her lengthy description of her step-mother's private behaviour.

In relation to the case of informant coded V4, her lack of informativeness seemed to root from selective forgetfulness, a possible strategy not to disclose the offender to the interviewer or to end the interview (Teoh and Lamb 2010). V4, however, related the incident of running away from the house.

Code: V4	Age: 17
Excerpt: <i>'Lepas tu saya ikut dia pergi mana, saya pun tak ingat. Tiga hari saya tak balik rumah'</i>	
Score: Informativeness – 1	
Analysis: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Why she could not remember [<i>tak ingat</i>] the places she had gone to? 2. No explicit report of her feelings about the event of running away from home 	

It was difficult to determine the possible lies swimming among the truth in her discourse. The information V4 offered throughout the interview lacked the gravity of the apparent horrendous experience of an abuse victim. It was shocking to the interviewer, for instance, when towards the end of the interview V4 casually admitted to having a child from the alleged sexual abuse.

V4 revealed several conditions of her living situation and family that cast shades of doubt on the information that she offered. Drug use and financial turmoils within the family seemed to have shaped her and her outlook in life. The family behaviour, as gleaned from V4 herself, warrants scrutiny. The interviewer found it strange that even when she was gone from their dwelling for three days, no one took notice of it.

From the psycholinguistics perspective, juxtaposed with the

attachment theory propagated by Snow et al. (2012), V4 displayed some kind of language impairments associated with an unsupportive environment – a family with histories of substance abuse and deep in debt – for early language development. As a consequence, V4 was given a ‘1’ for the criterion “informativeness”.

Nevertheless, V4 could be a fine specimen to further test the hypothesis of Snow et al. (2012) that children when pressured to give very specific details are more likely to construct or tolerate false details, under the probable pretext of wanting to appear capable or to terminate the interview. She could also provide a good study of the hypothesis made by Teoh and Lamb (2010) that in several communities, the offenders were even protected by the violated due to the sociocultural rules that dictate their ways of life.

There are also several other noteworthy factors that affect the informativeness of the victims who were interviewed. Shyness and modesty have a significant influence. This can be seen in the case involving victim 19 coded V19, where the situation warranted the initial male interviewer to switch places with a female one.

The male interviewer found it taxing to extract any crucial information from the victim. The victim, being shy of an adult male, offered little details of any importance. Naturally, for the “informativeness” criterion, the first interviewer awarded just ‘1’ point.

But later, when the interview was continued by the female interviewer, as requested by her male counterpart, it was shocking to the latter that the victim obtained an astounding ‘5’ for “informativeness”, suggesting that the dam was burst and information came in torrents.

CONCLUSION

The sexual abuse victims’ ages range from 12 to 17 at the time of the present study. Thus, the study agrees with the literature that age plays a crucial part in the overall outcome of the score for “informativeness” criterion in the personal event narrative rubric.

The younger ones display characteristics of being shy or modest more than their older mates. Extracting information from this group requires tact and patience. The older group – the more experienced ones – poses the problem of being tactful or even deceitful at times as identified by previous studies.

The results concur with the argument raised by Azzopardi et al. (2019) that forensic interviewing protocols could not even get half of the confirmed child victims to disclose the abuse. Therefore, this study concludes that the questions set for the forensic interview could be improvised to suit the ages of the sexual abuse victims which are far apart in order to illicit informativeness that is acceptable in the legal context.

The present study has also established that several developmental, socioemotional, interpersonal, and contextual barriers contribute to the lexical difficulty in the narratives of the victims.

The barriers are PTSD effects, unsupportive environment for early language development, unfair sociocultural practices of the informant’s community and selective memory. Hence, these barriers should be considered for future modification of the personal event narrative rubric developed by Westby and Martinez (2017).

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