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Forensic interviewers' perceptions of the utility of mock interviews as a training tool for child interviewing

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Abstract

Background: The use of mock interviews (also known as role play), particularly using trained actors as interviewees, has demonstrated positive effects on communication training but little is known about how learners engage with these practice activities. **Objective:** The current study was conducted to determine what perceptions forensic interviewers hold about mock interviews as a learning exercise for developing skills for child interviewing, and whether there are negative perceptions that could potentially have an impact on the helpfulness of the exercise. **Participants:** Written reflections were obtained from 35 US forensic interviewing professionals who were enrolled in an online child interviewer training program. **Method:** Common themes were extracted from the reflections to establish forensic interviewers' perceptions of aspects of the mock interview. Extraction of themes assisted in the determination of whether perceptions impacted the manner and degree to which interviewers engaged in the mock interview process. Results suggest that regardless of potential anxiety, learners experience multiple benefits from the mock interview. Findings from the present study have implications for the future use of mock interviews in child interview training programs and behaviors of trained role-players.

Keywords: Role-play, communication skill, assessment, forensic interview, children, interview training

Mock interviews (also known as role play) have been shown to provide a practice format that encourages rehearsal of critical communication skills (King, Hill, & Gleason, 2015). This educational exercise has typically involved students using skills learned in training to interact with an individual (e.g., a trained actor or fellow student) with the intention of gaining practice, feedback, assessment, or some combination of the three. Research has shown that mock interviews can be used in training programs across a variety of professional contexts to teach communication skills. For example, they have been used to train medical students to relax an agitated patient (Nestel & Tierney, 2007), and with forensic interviewers to increase effective questioning habits for child interviewees (Powell, 2008).

There is a multitude of demonstrated benefits associated with mock interviews, which we describe in the next section. However, learners have frequently mentioned that mock interviews feel un-natural (Lane & Rollnick, 2007). If learners maintain a mindset of anxiety

and discomfort with mock interview scenarios, they could experience decreased benefits due to a lack of engagement. An assessment of learners' perceptions about mock interviews can provide insight regarding their experiences and inform trainers and researchers about effective design for this exercise. This need motivated the current study, specifically with regard to the perceptions of interviewers training to interview child victims and witnesses. In advance of describing the present project, we provide an overview of mock interviews as a learning tool and their use in forensic child interview training.

How Mock Interviews Support Learning

The development of communication skills has been shown to be invaluable for professionals in many fields (King et al., 2015). It can be difficult, especially in high intensity fields that involve the well-being of individuals, to develop communication while in the applied setting. Mock interviews have provided the opportunity for professionals to practice and receive immediate feedback information within a controlled, low-stakes environment (Powell, Fisher, & Hughes-Scholes, 2008).

Unlike traditional teaching methods, mock interviews provide a hands-on, realistic learning forum. This practice format gives students a pro-active role in their learning through the application of new skills, followed by interactive feedback with explanations and discussions around the purpose of various communication approaches. Medical training that has featured mock interview exercises were found to predict professional achievement and improve knowledge implementation in the field (McGaghie, Issenberg, Cohen, Barsuk, & Wayne, 2011). Benefits of mock interviews were also observed in trainings for professionals in other fields such as social work (Bogo et al., 2012). Training founded in interactive practice opportunities established a link between information and skill use and can simultaneously improve learning while measuring performance potential (Bogo et al., 2012). Simulated interactions that use trained professionals, rather than peers, were shown to be particularly helpful in assisting learners in the improvement of their communication in work-related settings (Lane & Rollnick, 2007), and reinforcing intended training behaviors (Powell et al., 2008). It is speculated that learners perform better after practicing with trained professionals because trainers provide a higher level of realism through more consistent rewarding of desired behaviors with event-related details and avoidance of rewarding undesired ones. (Powell et al., 2008). Further, the trainers can increase motivation through their contribution of expertise (Powell et al., 2008).

Few studies have sought learners' perceptions about the utility of mock interviews, specifically, as a training tool. Bokken and colleagues (2009) provided evidence that medical students identified difficulties in the use of mock interviews as a representation of real conversations. Many explained that real patient interactions felt like a more natural process than mock interviews, and that role-players appeared to withhold information intentionally. In contrast, conversations with real patients lacked benefits such as strong constructive feedback but were perceived to have greater diversity and authenticity. Despite the benefits of mock interviews, such as the increased opportunity to practice communication, many medical students identified weaknesses in mock interviews and preferred real patient interactions.

Learners' perceptions of mock interviews may also be affected by the timing and specificity of their reflections. For example, Nestel and Tierney (2007) found that close to a quarter of the 284 students who took part in their study believed role play (in general) was not valuable to their learning. After completing a mock interview as part of their curriculum; however, 97% of the sample agreed that the specific exercise was helpful. This finding did not take into account that participants may have been influenced by the other course activities and exercises they experienced (see also Powell & Wright, 2008).

Role-Play in Investigative Interview Training

Investigative interviewing is a primary tool for uncovering a timeline of events that contributes to the evidence of guilt or innocence in legal cases. As such, it is critical that interviewers are trained according to best-practice guidelines, and that the training itself is effective in producing high-validity outcomes (Benson & Powell, 2015). Around the world, despite receiving interview training, many evaluations have revealed a gap between knowledge of best practices and application of the skill (e.g., Canada: Luther, Snook, Barron, & Lamb, 2014; Finland: Korkman, Santilla, & Sandnabba, 2006; New Zealand: Wolfman, Brown, & Jose, 2016; Norway: Johnson et al., 2015; Sweden: Cederborg, Orbach, Sternberg & Lamb, 2000). This gap may be due in part to past trainings not including research-based practical exercises with feedback (Lamb, 2016). More studies are needed to provide examples of the value of various training activities.

Training that conveys best practice interviewing strategies should be delivered in a manner that maximizes learning potential. Successful interviewer training programs have been those that emphasize skills through practice formats that incorporate feedback (Lamb, 2016). Mock interviewing, a useful form of skill practice, has been found to maximize practice results and increase skill improvement in successful forensic interviewer training programs (Benson & Powell, 2015; Powell, 2008). There is evidence that trainees learning to interview children perceived mock interviews as beneficial, particularly when the interviewee was trained to adopt children's response style (Powell & Wright, 2008; Wright, Guadagno, & Powell, 2009). Nonetheless, the extant research focused broadly on perceptions of interview practice activities rather than directly exploring perceptions about the mock interview with trained actors. A more in-depth examination was needed to determine how learners engage with mock interviews as a learning tool, and to determine whether their utility could be limited by negative perceptions related to differences between mock and field interviews.

Current Study

Past research has provided evidence that feedback and reflection have the potential to be more beneficial tools than other exercises that do not contain direct observations by a trainer (Hauer, Holmboe, & Kogan, 2011). Despite this knowledge, it is still unclear if learners' perceptions influence the effectiveness of mock interviews. Thus, the aims of the current study were to a) establish with which aspects in the mock interview learners had a tendency to interact with, and b) determine if the learners held negative perceptions that overshadowed the potential usefulness of the mock interview. A reflective format was used to discover forensic interviewers' perceptions of how facets of the mock interview contribute to their individual learning experiences. It was deemed important to elicit the voices of current forensic interview trainees as they were immersed in the training (rather than prior to training or after the conclusion). The results will provide trainers with insight about how mock interviews might be altered to address any potential concerns, while maintaining critical learning elements. If learners commonly described aversive experiences such as role-play anxiety and a lack of realism, there could subsequently be minimized engagement and skill development that has implications for how mock interviews are used in training. No a priori hypotheses were established.

Method

Participants

Invitations to participate were sent out to everyone on the distribution list of a major US training organization (16,846 individuals, but not all would have been in a position to apply for the training). There were approximately 400 applications returned. From there, applications were reviewed by the organization with the following screening criteria: no more than one person from any agency, must be working in the US, and 50% or more of their job was devoted to forensic interviewing. Further, selection criteria aimed to maximize the number different states represented across trainees, and the diversity in interviewing background (specifically, maximal representation of forensic interviewers who had been trained using different protocols. Ultimately, 44 individuals were offered a place in the training; this was the maximum number possible given available training resources.

Seven participants began the training but were unable to complete it due to work commitments. The final sample included 37 forensic interviewers (36 female) who took the training course between 2017- 2019. Information about work experience interviewing children was available for 21 participants. They were asked to report what percentage of their job time is devoted to interviewing children. Four reported between 26-50%, four reported between 51-75%, and 13 reported >76%. After signing up for training, participants received an information letter that detailed how their learning data would be used anonymously for research and evaluation. They were permitted to withdraw their data without penalty, but none did. There was no direct compensation for participating in the research. The university's human research ethics board approved the research.

Materials and Procedure

There were six modules in the online course that included a series of readings, exercises, videos, quizzes, mock interviews, and the related reflection exercise that is the focus of the present research. The course was intended to take approximately 18 hours. Mock interviews took place immediately prior to the learning intervention (baseline), halfway through the course, and at the conclusion.

Outcomes of this pass/fail course were determined by a review of the skills present in the final mock interview. Grades were identified and distributed by a course trainer outside of the organization from which the participants were selected. Participants were made aware that reflections had no impact on course performance, and furthermore reflections were not read by researchers until after course grades were finalized.

Mock interviews. In the three mock interviews, course participants demonstrated their interviewing skills through dialogue with a trained role-player who was playing the role of the child interviewee. The first mock interview was a baseline to establish skills prior to course commencement. The second mock interview was completed halfway through the course as a practice and feedback opportunity, and an evaluation of progress after 50% course completion. Immediately after the second mock interview, participants completed the reflection exercise. The last interview provided another opportunity for practice and feedback, in addition to serving as an evaluation of interviewer skill growth after course completion.

Mock interviews occurred via a video chat in an online platform (Adobe Connect or Skype). This provided individualized virtual face-to-face feedback sessions within the online training platform. Past research has indicated that there is no significant difference between the usefulness of face-to-face and online learning elements in impacting student performance (Wieling & Hofman, 2010). Prior to each mock interview, participants received a short

scenario brief on the child they would be interviewing. The created scenarios were all allegations of sexual abuse based on actual criminal investigations. Included in the scenario brief was the child's name, age, and a short description of the information the police had (i.e., "You are interviewing X who told her mom, 'Daddy's stick hurt me'"). Participants then interviewed a trained role-player, who was familiarized with the mock interview scenario, for a maximum of 15 minutes (see Powell et al., 2008, for a similar procedure and details of role-player training). Each participant was randomly assigned three of the six scenarios. All scenarios were used at all time points.

Reflection exercise. Following the second mock interview, participants completed a reflection exercise that assessed their perceptions about the mock interview and how it contributed to their preparation for future interview roles. Participants' responses were intended not only for research purposes but also as a learning enhancement. Past research has provided evidence of a positive correlation between deep reflection and learning performance (Lee, 2013). By reflecting on the mock interview and their skill development, this exercise increased participant's interactivity in the course and the depth of their learning. It was recognized that participants might be inclined to agree that the mock interview was helpful in an attempt to please researchers. As such, there was a second goal behind framing responses as learning-focused: to decrease participant response bias. The reflection was composed of three question prompts, as follows:

- 1) Reflect on your experience. Did you find the mock interview helpful? Did you learn something new? What skills did you practice?
- 2) Briefly summarize the main 2-3 points raised by your trainer during your feedback.
- 3) What are your learning goals for the remainder of the course? How do you plan to achieve these objectives?

Participants composed an approximately 300-word response ($M = 295$, $SD = 127$). Responses were submitted in a Microsoft word document via the online course forum. Each response was downloaded from the course site and de-identified prior to being coded. Responses were reviewed by two of the authors who were familiar with the course content, and mock interview and learning literature. This allowed for a semi-structured extraction of the common themes that appeared in responses and the subsequent creation of operational definitions based on themes in related research. Themes emerged through the process of grounded theory, meaning the themes originated from the data that was present (Browne & Sullivan, 1999), in addition to the research literature (Layder, 1993). Thematic analysis was flexible to the content of the reflection, while also originating from pre-existing identified concepts that emerged in similar research.

Each statement within every reflection was analyzed and coded according to the identified themes. If statements were related or exhibited parallel concepts, they were combined under the same theme. Reflection statements were coded with a 1 if they contained the theme and a 0 if they did not contain the theme. Upon coding completion, the reflections were reviewed a second time to determine if any other excerpts matched the previously established themes. The themes were then grouped by overhead themes based on similarity, to simplify coding and the presentation of results. Quotations used in this paper were taken from the already de-identified reflections and checked for identifying features and grammatical errors to ensure anonymity and clarity.

Reliability

Because themes were jointly developed by two co-authors who were familiar with the literature surrounding mock interviewing and human learning, a research assistant (RA) unrelated to the current project was employed to verify the themes. The RA was given a

manual with operational definitions for the themes and a set of reflection excerpts. The RA was asked to code each reflection excerpt in accordance with the manual. Agreement between the RAs codes and those of the co-authors was assessed with Cohen's Kappa (0.83). There were five discrepancies. These were resolved by revisiting the reflections and determining which theme was most appropriate.

Results

Participants were assigned a randomly generated number for the purposes of identifying their quotes (i.e., to ensure that themes did not arise from only a small group of respondents); quotes are followed by this bracketed identification number. Responses largely indicated that the mock interview was perceived to be beneficial to participants' learning, and specific features of it were identified. In participant reflections, 94.6% ($n = 35$) of individuals enrolled in the course described the mock interview session as contributing positively to their learning. One participant stated it was not helpful and one stated it was somewhat helpful. One participant explained how the mock interview supported the course learning concepts:

I felt the mock interview was very helpful. It was nice to be able to really focus on my questions and keep my questions very open-ended versus having to rush through questioning for investigators. It also was good practice to show how much more information can come from those open-ended questions. I learned that asking open-ended questions really gives richer and better information, and the skills I learned are how to do more breadth and depth questions. [034]

Results are presented by broad overhead themes and the specific sub-themes that define them. Each of the subthemes relate to interviewer behaviors and course facets connected to the helpfulness of the mock interview. The overhead themes are presented in Table 1 along with the subthemes and definitions.

Themes were defined by two or three specific ideas that were frequently presented by participants in their reflections; these are illustrated in the sections below.

Table 1
Reflection Themes and definitions

Themes and subthemes	Definitions
Factors inherent to the mock interview	
a. Practice	Participant identified the opportunity to use interview skills in a rehearsal context as contributing to their learning in the mock interview
b. Attempt at new techniques	Participant explicitly referred to the mock interview as being an opportunity to try new strategies or to change existing behaviours
c. Realism	Participant discussed the trainer's role-playing abilities, or the extent to which the situation felt like a real interview
What the learners bring to the experience	
a. Application	Participants reported applying their learned skills to real interviews
b. Behavioral insight	Participant analyzed why they used certain techniques and recognized the mental process behind their question choices
What the course brings to the experience	
a. Course agreeability	Participants observed the user-friendly aspects of the course (e.g., safe space, self-paced, comfortability)
b. Identifying bad habits	Participant recognized a propensity to use less desirable interviewing techniques, and their associated attempts to correct negative habits
What the trainer brings to the experience	
a. Explanations and discussions	Participant identified the trainer's ability to provide clarity behind the use and purpose of techniques by employing justifications or conversations after the mock interview
b. Immediate feedback	Participant emphasized the feedback's close relationship in time and use of specific behavioural examples

Factors Inherent to the Mock Interview

The first theme contained three subsections that related to qualities of the exercise itself: *practice*, *attempt at new techniques*, and *realism*. Practice was defined as the participant identifying the opportunity to use interview skills in a rehearsal context as contributing to their learning in the mock interview. Overall, interviewers tended to view practice as beneficial. Nearly half of participant responses, 48.6% ($n = 18$), discussed the use of the mock interview for practice purposes (e.g., "Out of all the training exercises I thought [the mock interview] was the most tangible in regard to using what I learned". [008]).

The category of attempt at new techniques was identified when a participant explicitly referred to the mock interview as being an opportunity to try new strategies or to change existing behaviours. This idea was observed in 29.7% ($n = 11$) of reflections and is illustrated in the following quote:

[The mock interview] gave me an opportunity to work on open-ended questions and narrative practice. I think I have been doing narrative practice differently, so I was able to try to do it in a new way. [005]

Realism was referred to in 21.6% ($n = 8$) of reflections. This subtheme was identified when the participant discussed the trainer's role-playing abilities, or the extent to which the situation felt like a real interview. Three participants (8.1%) discussed aspects of realism in a positive manner:

The trainer did a good job playing [child], who is 5 years old. The scenario was very realistic and easy to work with. The practice narrative seemed to flow and [the child]

appeared to be very engaged. [The child] knew what she came to talk about, so the transition was easy. [014]

In contrast, 13.5% ($n = 5$) made negative remarks about realism facets, such as, “I do find mock interviews challenging in that it’s hard to picture the adult being a kid, it throws me off a bit” [029]. The majority of participants did not mention realism, but of those who did, most portrayed it with negative implications.

What Learners Bring to the Experience

The second theme was defined by two aspects: *application* and *behavioral insights*. These specific themes were grouped because they pertained to the learner’s thought processes that contributed to their past and future use of the behaviors. The theme of application was identified when participants reported applying their learned skills to real interviews. Participants who mentioned how they connected the mock interview to actual interviews and interviewing skills were in the majority (62.2% [$n = 23$]); for example, “It was pointed out to me that adding ‘Tell me’ to a WH question does not make it an open question. I have been attempting to correct this in my interviews” [035]. These participants were able to relate the practice forum provided by the mock interview to their actual interviews and indicate an intention to use their new skills in the applied setting.

The idea of behavioral insight was operationally defined as the participant being able to analyze why they used certain techniques and recognizing the mental process behind their question choices. In the current study’s reflections, this process of analyzing actions was linked to mock interview helpfulness 21 times:

[A main point raised by my trainer was to] be conscientious of idiosyncratic phrasing because it can be confusing for children. This phrasing is something that I know that I overuse because I had difficulty even hearing myself say it. [025]

It was determined that the participant provided evidence of behavioral insight if they analyzed their own behavior and how the mock interview feedback impacted their interviewing skills. Many excerpts were identified as showing behavioral insight through explicit self-review of performance:

I have trouble with narrative practice and keeping it focused and on track. [Trainer] and I discussed ways to try and stay focused and keep the narrative and the child on track. I sometimes have a difficult time knowing which details or “path” to follow and get caught up in the details that are not so important. [001]

A total of 56.8% ($n = 21$) of learners included behavioral insights similar to the above examples in their reflections.

What the Overarching Course Brings to the Experience

This theme focused on how the format of the training course and activities enabled trainees to feel comfortable critiquing their own behavior in the mock interview. The reflection theme was divided into two aspects: *course agreeability* and *identifying bad habits*.

Course agreeability, the user-friendly aspects of the course (e.g., safe space, self-paced, comfortability), was observed by participants in 29.7% ($n = 11$) of reflections. Powell, Wright, and Clark (2010) also found that similar course facets, such as flexible environments, aid in effective learning. Of those who mentioned course agreeability in the current study, 21.6% ($n = 8$) were wholly positive. “It was a safe forum to practice some of the new skills and techniques that I have learned since beginning this course” [010]. Three participants who

identified user-friendly aspects—such as the creation of a safe space to practice—nonetheless reported that they experienced nervousness during the exercise.

Identifying bad habits was operationally defined as the participant recognizing a propensity to use less desirable interviewing techniques, and their associated attempts to correct negative habits. A large number of participants in the training program (56.8%; $n = 21$) indicated that identifying their bad habits was an important aspect of the mock interview's helpfulness:

It is so simple to fall into your own routine as a forensic interviewer, especially after having this job for an extended period of time. Since starting this online course, I have isolated areas in which I need improvement in my own interviews, like transitioning to a disclosure with young children, and using the different breadth and depth questions appropriately. [011]

This theme had a common presence in reflections and involved a self-critique of behavioral tendencies. The mock interview, unlike observational-based activities, provided a format for learners to identify their bad habits. A willingness of learners to recognize consistent past use of improper techniques may be evidence that learners are comfortable and engaged with the learning environment, as it is not easy to acknowledge bad habits.

What the Trainer Brings to the Experience

The final theme was split into two categories: *explanations and discussions*, and *immediate feedback*. The theme of what the trainer brings to the experience highlights concepts that are evoked by communication with the trained role-player. Explanations and discussions was identified as a subtheme when the participant identified the trainer's ability to provide clarity behind the use and purpose of techniques by employing justifications or conversations after the mock interview. The trainer verbally engaged with the learner and examined various behaviors and why they should, or should not, be used. This theme was prevalent in almost half of reflections (48.6%; $n = 18$). Reflections that mentioned explanations and discussions denoted them as beneficial for their learning. One participant stated, "The way the trainer explained the importance of this practice really cleared things up for me" [002].

This category of immediate feedback appeared to emerge through the emphasis of the feedback's close relationship in time and use of specific behavioural examples. "I especially appreciated that the mock interview provided an opportunity for immediate individualized feedback from a trainer" [010]. Learners' reflections also suggested that the feedback information they received resulted in changes to their interviewing behaviors that would be applied in future interviews.

Discussion

The learners who took part in the current project reflected on a variety of aspects that contributed to the helpfulness of mock interviews and their interviewing skill development. These findings add to the literature suggesting that building on learners' direct experience through the use of mock interviews and immediate interactive feedback are valuable training tools for forensic interviewers. In this training, the mock interview served not only as an exercise to practice effective and developmentally appropriate questioning, but also as an opportunity to receive feedback information and reflect on performance. These individual factors of mock interviews combine to generate an interactive environment that encourages learning through multiple systems simultaneously (e.g., rehearsal, experience, conversation, critiques) (Lamb, 2016).

In the present study, we sought learners' perceptions of the mock interviews immediately after they completed them. This procedure was similar to that used by Wright and colleagues (2009) in a diary study evaluating the effectiveness of self-initiated practice. In that study, 26 investigators reflected on the utility of interview practice attempts with: children, trained adults playing the role of children, and untrained adults describing an innocuous personal event. In general, the participants found these role play attempts beneficial. Specifically, interviewing children and adults playing the role of children felt more realistic and more challenging than the adult-innocuous mock interviews because, in the latter, trainees found that the interviewee's response style was unnatural. Mock interviews with children also frequently involved logistical problems like the child not understanding the need to sit and participate in the exercise.

Findings from the present study were also consistent with previous research where perceptions about different types of practice (including mock interviews) were solicited several months after training completion (Powell & Wright, 2008). The current results further support the recommendation for use of mock interviews with trained role-players as a tool to assist in training interviewers learning to interview children. The majority of learners reflected on the mock interview with a positive frame of mind. Perceptions from learners stressed the overall effectiveness of the mock interview, even if some criticisms were present as well.

Take-home Messages for Trainers

Trained role-players can benefit from the results of the current study through the future emphasis on the aspects that learners commonly identified from mock interview interactions. The overhead theme that was mentioned most often was what the trainer brought to the experience. This finding is consistent with research suggesting that interactivity has an important function in learning interviewing skills and behaviors (Powell et al., 2010; Rheingold et al., 2014). Trainers should be aware that not only the realistic quality of their role-play, but also their subsequent communication with trainees, plays a significant part in how the learner perceives the mock interview. The subtheme that most frequently emerged from this overhead category was immediate feedback, followed by explanations and discussions. Participants valued the trainer extracting specific examples of problematic behaviors as the mock interview unfolded, clearly explaining and discussing why they were problematic, and offering useful behaviors as a replacement. Trainers should ensure that they allow for ample time for feedback input immediately after the mock interview in a manner that allows the learner to interact with the information. Immediate feedback information is considered one of the primary components of effective learning in training courses (Powell, 2008).

Many learners also mentioned the application of skills and behavioral insights in relation to the helpfulness of the mock interview. Mock interviews present an ideal controlled environment (Powell et al., 2008) in which to incorporate these two concepts and assist learners in reflecting on the quality of their behaviors. It is important to create links between practice, information, and skills to increase learning potential for individuals in the training program (Bogo et al., 2012). This can be done through the trainer explicitly making connections between the mock interview and actual interviews, in addition to bringing up the *why* behind behaviors. If trainers spark this line of thinking, they can potentially start the internal reflection process and increase feedback benefits. Encouraging learners to reflect on their performance can improve feedback through further interaction, and personalization of the information (Hauer et al., 2011).

Research from the medical field has indicated that students often face internal dilemmas with role-play scenarios such as awkwardness due to a lack of realism (Lane &

Rollnick, 2007). However, there was little evidence that these aversions occurred frequently in forensic interview training, at least with regard to child scenarios. In the current study, only a small number of participants ($n = 5$) had difficulty with the quality of realism and struggled with remaining engaged throughout the scenario. Yet, most were still able to interact with the trained role-player in a manner that benefitted their skills and behavior development. Participants who shared challenges they had with the mock interview simultaneously imbedded positive comments in their reflections that indicated advantages provided by the experience.

There are clear differences between the dynamics of mock interviews and actual interviews, which some learners appeared to identify and have difficulty with. Specifically, the power dynamic is reversed in mock interviews; the student interviewer has more feelings of anxiety and less power than the interviewee, and the latter often provides the feedback and assessment (Malhotra et al., 2009). While this may impact realism, it likely does not minimize mock interview benefits. The mock interview does not necessarily need to be realistic in that role-players seem like they are a child, but that they respond in a way that is known to promote learning (Powell et al., 2008). In their reflections, participants discussed the similarities between role-player and child, rather than how the role-play responses encouraged intended behaviors. There are situations where realism could be critical (e.g., in medicine, a highly emotive situation like end of life discussions), but if the goal is to train effective questioning habits, it is not critical that the learner perceives the trainer as a child (Powell et al., 2008). A takeaway for trainers is to ensure the learners understand this goal.

Limitations and Future Directions

The current study provided valuable insights directly from forensic interviewers, immediately after experiencing a mock interview embedded within their training. Some limitations, however, should be taken into consideration. The findings rely on the written reflections of course participants. Most reflections were brief responses. Research would benefit from a follow up study of in-person verbal interviews that encourage more elaborate and spontaneous responses. An anonymous interview that requires immediate responses would decrease the potential bias of the learners attempting to please the interviewer with their responses. We endeavored to minimize this possible bias by framing the reflection as a learning activity rather than a course review, but additional studies that provide less time to plan responses would reduce the participants' opportunity to frame answers in a certain manner.

While this study provides an example of the benefits of mock interviews for training forensic interviewers to interview children, learners' perceptions may be dissimilar in other contexts such as interviewing juveniles, adult witnesses, and suspects. More research is needed to determine the extent to which results from this study generalize to other interviewing contexts. The next step for researchers in this field should be to examine the internal structure of mock interviews to identify the specific elements that make them effective across varied contexts (e.g., training interviewers to interview adolescent and adult victims of relationship violence, armed robberies, and other crimes).

Conclusion

Although mock interviews have aspects that differentiate them from real interviews, they can have benefits for skill growth, not only from the researcher's perspective but also from the view of the learners (Powell & Wright, 2008). The current study suggests that any potential difficulty participants may have with role-play anxiety and realism did not negate the effectiveness of mock interviews. Most learners appeared to engage with the learning

features offered by the mock interview, which ultimately produced an immersive exercise that was viewed in an overall positive manner by learners.

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