"He Couldn't Have Done It, He Was With Me!": The Impact of Alibi Witness Age and Relationship

LEORA C. DAHL[1]* and HEATHER L. PRICE[2]

[1]*Department of Psychology, Okanagan College, Kelowna, British Columbia, Canada*
[2]*Department of Psychology, University of Regina, Regina, Saskatchewan, Canada*

Summary: Undergraduate participants who conducted a simulated police investigation were presented with either a child (6 years old) or adult (25 years old) alibi witness, who was either the son or neighbor of the participant's suspect. Replicating previous research, participants were more likely to believe the adult neighbor alibi witness than the adult son. In fact, an alibi provided by the adult son actually proved detrimental to that suspect, as participants thought the suspect was more likely to be guilty after viewing an alibi provided by the adult son. However, child-provided alibis reduced perceptions of suspect guilt, regardless of that child's relationship to the suspect. The child alibi witnesses were also viewed by the participants as more credible than the adult witnesses. Copyright © 2011 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

To date, there have been 280 post-conviction exoneration cases in the United States (The Innocence Project, 2011). These cases have allowed us to gain a better understanding of the variables involved when an innocent person is convicted of a crime they did not commit. The role of alibis in wrongful conviction cases has recently become of interest to researchers (e.g. Burke, Turtle, & Olson, 2007; Dahl, Brimacombe, & Lindsay, 2009; McAllister & Bregman, 1989). Presumably, these exonerees had an alibi for their whereabouts at the time of the crime, an alibi that the police and/or the jury found unconvincing. Exploring variables that may contribute to the believability of an alibi is the focus of the present work.

A factor that likely affects the believability of an alibi is whether the suspect/defendant can provide support for the alibi either through physical evidence (such as a time-specific receipt) or through person evidence (someone with the suspect at the time of the crime who testifies to their whereabouts). When the alibi is supported through person evidence, police and jurors likely take the alibi witness' relationship to the suspect into account. Previous research (e.g. Hosch, Culhane, Jolly, Chavez, & Hawley, 2011; Olson & Wells, 2004) has found that the participants are more likely to believe an alibi witness when that witness is unrelated to the defendant (such as a neighbor or store clerk). That is, when the alibi witness is not seen to have a motive to provide an alibi, the alibi is viewed as more credible. Most previous research has focused on comparing alibis provided by an unrelated witness to familial witnesses such as the suspect's brother or mother (e.g. Olson & Wells, 2004). It is intuitive that an alibi provided by a close family member raises more concerns when compared with one provided by an acquaintance or stranger, but we know little about variability among family members (but see Hosch et al., 2011). That is, certain family members may be as credible, or perhaps even more credible than a stranger alibi witness. In the current research, we explore the perceived credibility of an alibi provided by one family member who a suspect would presumably spend a large amount of time with, the suspect's child.

Children as alibi-witnesses

Kennedy Brewer, Alan Newton, and James O'Donnell were all convicted of crimes that they did not commit, despite alibi witnesses who supported their alibis (The Innocence Project, 2011). In all three cases, the alibis were supported by their children or stepchildren. Given how much time and how much time alone, parents and caregivers spend with their children, it is likely that children are often the sole available alibi witness. As such, it is important to assess how investigators and potential triers of fact are influenced by both the alibi witness–suspect relationship, the age of the alibi witness, and whether the importance of relationship status (related vs unrelated) observed in previous research holds true with child alibi witnesses.

Although there has been a fair amount of research examining children's perceived credibility as witnesses and the factors that might affect these evaluations (e.g. Leippe, Manion & Romanczyk, 1992; McCauley & Parker, 2001); to our knowledge, there has not been any research examining children in the role of alibi witnesses. One might expect that, generally, credibility assessments of alibi witnesses and eyewitnesses would be similar. Both alibi witnesses and eyewitnesses are called upon to report memory for an event, and as such, they are both vulnerable to the same memory errors (Burke et al., 2007). Alibi witnesses and eyewitnesses also share the characteristic that they are a live and in-person form of evidence (versus other forms of evidence provided as written reports). Thus, either type of witness might be seen as a somewhat ambiguous form of evidence, not only because their memories might be faulty, but also because they are judged on verbal and nonverbal reactions during testimony, demeanor, clothing, and other non-factual evidence. However, it is also the case that an alibi witness is more likely than an eyewitness to have a personal relationship with the suspect (Culhane, Hosch, & Kehn; 2008). The literature on child witnesses provides a starting place for

*Correspondence to: Leora C. Dahl, Department of Psychology, Okanagan College, 1000 KLO Rd, Kelowna, British Columbia, Canada, V1Y 4X8.
E-mail: ldahl@okanagan.bc.ca

understanding and predicting how child alibi witnesses may be viewed by investigators.

The evaluation of children's credibility as witnesses has been conceptualized as falling along two dimensions: perceived honesty and perceived cognitive competency (i.e. accuracy). Generally, children are perceived as more honest (i.e. have less reason or ability to lie), whereas adults are perceived as more competent cognitively (i.e. have greater cognitive capacities to perceive events and report details accurately) (Bottoms, 1993; Connolly, Price & Gordon, 2010; Ross, Jurden, Lindsay & Keeney, 2003). The combination of these two factors may lead to complex credibility evaluations that depend on the nature of the allegations and information required from the witness. For example, young children alleging sexual abuse tend to be perceived as more credible than either older children or adults making similar allegations, who may be viewed as more likely to have motivation and ability to fabricate such an accusation (e.g. Bottoms, 1993). This commonly reported finding is said to occur because in sexual abuse complaints, honesty is relatively more salient than cognitive ability. In the case of alibi provision, it is unclear how investigators evaluate a child's testimony. It may be that with child alibi witnesses, honesty is particularly salient, with children perceived to be lacking the ability to effectively develop and maintain a false alibi, in which case the child's testimony will be given greater weight than an adult's. However, it is reasonable to anticipate that cognitive ability—particularly with regard to specific times, dates, and locations—may be especially important in the provision of an alibi and thus, diminish a child's perceived credibility as an alibi witness.

Relationship between alibi-witness and suspect

Previous research has found that the alibi witness's relationship to the suspect plays a substantial role in the believability of that alibi (e.g. Lindsay, Lim, Marando, & Cully, 1986; Olson & Wells, 2004). For example, Culhane and Hosch (2004) manipulated alibi witness and defendant relationship (girlfriend or neighbor) and found that conviction rates were lower with an alibi provided by a neighbor than by a girlfriend. When the alibi was provided by a girlfriend, conviction rates were no lower than when there was no alibi witness at all. Hosch et al. (2011) took this work one step further by examining the degree of relationship from genetic relatives (e.g. twins, half sister), to affinitive relatives (wife, sister-in-law), and to social relationships (best friend, neighbor, stranger). They assessed how likely participants thought it was that each of 15 people across these three categories would be willing to lie for the defendant. Biological relatives were found to be the least trustworthy, unrelated witnesses the most trustworthy, and affinal relatives fell in the middle. Further, within the biological relative category, they found that the closer the biological relationship, the less trustworthy the alibi witness was.

In addition to providing important depth to the study of family members as alibi witnesses, the relationship of a child to the suspect may also provide insight into the relative perceived credibility of alibi witnesses, as children may also fill the role of a non-relational alibi witness (e.g. for a neighbor, coach, teacher). Children's motivations in relational and non-relational alibis may be evaluated and perceived differently than adults'. The two factor model of child witness credibility evaluations described above provides some guidance on predicting the potential influence of children's alibis in familial and non-familial relationships. When an alibi witness is related to the suspect, the likelihood that he or she will be forthcoming is probably the greatest concern. That is, for relational alibi witnesses, honesty may be more salient than accuracy. In previous research, situations in which honesty is the most salient consideration has led to heightened credibility evaluations of children when compared with adults (e.g. Bottoms, 1993). Applying this pattern to the provision of alibis, perhaps evaluators will not be as wary of a child who provides an alibi for a relative (when compared with an adult providing the same alibi). Conversely, when an alibi witness is not related to the suspect, honesty is a less salient concern and cognitive competence may then be more heavily weighted, giving adults the credibility advantage. Overall, it is our expectation that children will be seen as more credible alibi witness than adults, perhaps, even to the point that a related child witness will be perceived as more credible than a non-familial adult.

Investigator paradigms

Much of previous alibi research has focused on participant-jurors. However, also of interest is how those on the front lines of criminal investigations evaluate alibis. Sommers and Douglass (2007) found that the participants in the roles of jurors or police investigators assess alibis differently. That is, they found that participant-investigators viewed an alibi as stronger evidence than participant-jurors who saw the same alibi. They argued that participant-jurors assumed that the alibi must be fairly weak in order for the case to have gone to trial. The authors also found that having an alibi witness (i.e. the suspect's mother) only influenced participants when they were role-playing investigators and not when they were role-playing jurors.

Olson and Wells (2004) used a participant–investigator paradigm to assess the influence of witness relationship and the presence of physical evidence when evaluating an alibi. The researchers examined the impact of physical and/or person evidence on mock police investigators and found that when physical evidence was available, it always trumped the alibi witness, regardless of the witness's relationship to the suspect. In fact, alibi witnesses only had a significant effect on the believability ratings of alibis when no physical evidence was present. In that case, an alibi corroborated by someone who would not lie about the alibi and also not mistakenly identify the suspect (e.g. a store clerk at a shop regularly visited by the suspect) was viewed as more believable than an alibi provided by someone who would be willing to lie for the suspect (e.g. the suspect's brother).

It is clear that the majority of research in both the participant–juror and participant–investigator realm has found that relationship status matters. In the current research, we extend the study of this relationship in two ways. As already discussed, we were first interested in examining whether age of the alibi witness would interact with

relationship status. Thus, our alibi witnesses are either 6 or 25 years old, and they are either the son or neighbor of the suspect. Second, we also wanted to expand the role of our participant-investigators using the paradigm designed by Dahl, Lindsay, and Brimacombe (2006). In previous alibi studies, the participants were simply told that they would be role-playing investigators and were presented with written information about the case and alibi. Our goal was to increase participants' investment in the outcome of the case by having them conduct a mock-investigation in which they would be responsible for choosing a suspect from a database of possibilities based on a description of the crime and culprit.

The participants then watched a video of either a 6 or 25 year old male alibi witness provides an alibi for the suspect the participant chose from the database. In this study, the child alibi witness was required to provide an alibi with the same complexity as that provided by an adult. We still wanted the child to be perceived as young, so to balance these needs, we selected the age of 6 years to represent a "child". We chose to use videotaped alibis because although it is possible that an investigator would only encounter alibi evidence through a written report, it is likely that an investigator would have the contextual face-to-face contact with alibi witnesses and that this could affect witness evaluations.

Method

Participants

One hundred and 24 male (*N* = 38) and female (*N* = 86) university and college students between the ages of 18 and 60 (*M* = 24, *SD* = 8.22) participated individually in return for bonus points in an introductory psychology course. The participants were randomly divided into the experimental conditions. The study was a two (Alibi Witness Age: 6 years old, 25 years old) by two (Alibi Witness Relationship: Son, Neighbor) between-subjects design.

Materials and procedure

When the participants arrived, they were informed that they would be taking on the role of a police officer, be given information about a crime, and would participate in a mock investigation of that crime.

The participants were first given a mock police file that described a robbery and an eyewitness's description of the 50 year old culprit. The description of the crime was based on a 3-minute simulated crime video. In a previous study, the participant eyewitnesses were asked to watch the same video and provide verbal descriptions of the culprit and crime (Dahl et al., 2006). The description of the crime and culprit used in this study was based on those descriptions.

The participant was then given instructions for using a computer database to search for a suspect. The participants were told that they would examine a database containing potential suspects who all had previous arrests on file. They were informed that the culprit might not be in the database. The database provided information regarding each suspect's physical description, prior criminal record, current employment, and registered vehicles. The participants had to examine all of the suspects before they could make a decision to either further investigate one of those suspects or to reject all of the suspects as the possible culprit (however, the database was rigged to make it appear that one of the suspects was a good match to the culprit based on his physical description and prior criminal record).[1] Once the participants had selected a suspect, the computer program instructed them to alert the experimenter who gave them a questionnaire on which participants rated the probability that their suspect had committed the crime on a scale from 1%–100% (given that they chose a suspect they had to have some confidence that the suspect could have committed the crime, therefore, 0 was not an option). They were also asked whether they would be willing to arrest the suspect given the information that they had, and if not, what evidence they would require to arrest the suspect.

Next, the participants were shown a video of either a child or adult alibi witness. The video showed the alibi witness sitting at a table answering questions posed by an interviewer who was off screen. During the video, the child or adult identified himself as either the son or neighbor of the suspect. To maintain consistency between the child and adult videos, both videos were shot in the same room with the actors sitting in the same position. Two 6 year old and two 25 year old Caucasian males were filmed providing both the son and neighbor alibis. The videos were pilot tested to ensure that the participants did not find one of the actors more convincing than the others. In addition, the videos were counter-balanced, so that each of the eight resulting videos was shown to an equal number of participants. The scripts for the adult and child alibis were identical except that the child indicated that he was with the suspect on the day of the crime because his mother was tending his sick grandmother to allay concern about an inappropriate relationship between the child and neighbor. The adult scripts did not contain this information.

After the participants saw the video, they again rated the probability that their suspect had committed the crime, whether or not they would arrest him, and then also assessed the credibility of the alibi information (i.e. how accurate is the alibi likely to be?) and the credibility of the alibi witness (i.e. how honest is the alibi witness likely to be?), each on a 1–10 scale (not at all to extremely). Finally, as a manipulation check, the participants were asked to indicate the alibi witness's age and relationship to the suspect.

Results

Effect of actor on questionnaire measures

Analyses were conducted (on all measures from both questionnaires) to determine whether differences existed within each age group between the two actors. There were no significant differences between actors within each age group (all *p*'s > .5), so all analyses were conducted with the two videos of each age collapsed.

Manipulation check

The participants were asked to report the alibi witness's age and relationship status to the suspect. All the participants

---

[1] Nevertheless, some participants (*N* = 10) made the decision not to choose a suspect, or chose a different suspect from the database, in these cases, the experiment immediately concluded and no further data were gathered from these participants.

correctly reported the witness's relationship to the suspect. In the child witness conditions, the mean reported age was 6.12 years ($SD = 0.51$) and the mean age in the adult witness conditions was 28.66 years ($SD = 5.72$).

Pre-alibi probability suspect committed the crime
The participants were asked to rate the probability (on a scale from 1% to 100%) that their suspect was the culprit. The overall mean was 68.98% ($SD = 23.70$). At this point, the participants had not seen the alibi video, nevertheless, an analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted to ensure that there were no group differences based on condition at this point, and it was not significant ($p = .15$). Roughly 30% of the participants reported that they would arrest the suspect given the information they had received so far ($N = 39$).

Probability suspect committed the crime change scores
A 2 (Age: Child, Adult) $\times$ 2 (Relationship: Son, Neighbor) 2 (Pre-Alibi, Post-Alibi) repeated measures ANOVA was conducted to determine whether there were significant differences between participants' pre-alibi and post-alibi ratings of the probability that the suspect committed the crime. There was a significant change between pre-alibi and post-alibi probability ratings overall, $F(1, 120) = 19.88$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .14$. There was also a significant two-way interaction between pre-alibi and post-alibi ratings and Age, $F(1, 120) = 35.15$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .23$. The participants in the Child Alibi condition thought it was less likely that their suspect had committed the crime after they viewed the alibi ($M = 54.63$, $SD = 24.87$) than before viewing the alibi ($M = 70.13$, $SD = 24.59$), yet, there was not a significant difference in pre-alibi ($M = 67.84$, $SD = 22.92$) and post-alibi ($M = 70.03$, $SD = 23.32$) scores in the Adult Alibi condition. Therefore, receiving the alibi significantly reduced participants' ratings of the suspect's guilt when the alibi was provided by a child, but not when the alibi was provided by an adult. There was not a significant two-way interaction between pre-alibi and post-alibi ratings and Relationship, $F(1, 120) = 3.28$, $p = .07$, $\eta_p^2 = .03$, nor was there a significant three way interaction, $F(1, 120) = 1.87$, $p = .17$, $\eta_p^2 = .02$.

However, due to our *a priori* interest described earlier in the potential advantages of a child son providing an alibi when compared with an adult son (i.e. a result of greater weight placed on honesty relative to cognitive competence), we conducted paired samples *t*-tests to explore these potential differences. Indeed, as could be expected, when alibis were provided by a child, participants' ratings of their suspect's guilt decreased in both the child son and child neighbor condition post-alibi, $t(30) = 5.16$, $p < .001$, Cohen's $d = .57$ (for child son), and $t(30) = 4.79$, $p < .001$, Cohen's $d = .70$ (for child neighbor). See Figure 1 for change scores. We were surprised, however, to note that not only did the adult son's alibi not enhance the suspect's case, it actually *hurt* his case, as participants' ratings of their suspect's guilt went up in this condition post-alibi, $t(30) = 2.55$, $p = .02$, Cohen's $d = .39$, whereas, in the adult neighbor condition, the alibi did not appear to affect participants' ratings to any degree, $t(30) = 0.87$, $p = .39$, Cohen's $d = .10$.

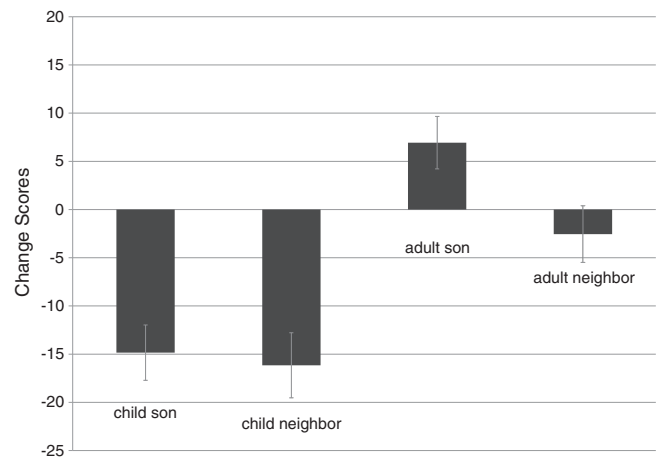Figure 1. Mean suspect guilt probability rating change score. Error bars = standard error of the mean

Post-alibi probability suspect committed crime
Given that actual police investigators are unlikely to take multiple measures of their own feelings towards a suspect's guilt after each piece of information using a step-by-step evaluative procedure (e.g. Adelman, Tolcott and Bresnick, 1993), we were also interested in the overall impact of the alibis following the presentation of all of the information. Therefore, a 2 (Age: Child, Adult) $\times$ 2 (Relationship: Son, Neighbor) between subjects ANOVA was conducted on participants' post-alibi estimates of the probability that the suspect was the culprit. There was a significant main effect of Age, $F(1, 120) = 13.24$, $p < .01$, $\eta_p^2 = .10$, but no effect of relationship $F(1, 120) = 1.78$, $p > .18$, $\eta_p^2 = .02$. The main effect of age was qualified by a significant interaction between Age and Relationship, $F(1, 120) = 5.82$, $p < .05$, $\eta_p^2 = .05$. The participants who saw an adult give the alibi rated the probability that their suspect committed the crime significantly higher when that alibi was provided by the son of the suspect ($M = 77.97$, $SD = 14.65$) than when it was provided by the neighbor of the suspect ($M = 62.10$, $SD = 27.59$), $t(60) = -2.83$, $p < .01$, Cohen's $d = .72$. There was no effect of relationship in the child alibi condition (Child Son: $M = 52.35$, $SD = 26.71$; Child Neighbor: $M = 56.90$, $SD = 23.11$), $t(60) = 0.72$, $p > .40$, Cohen's $d = .18$. See Figure 2.

Credibility of the alibi/alibi witness
The participants were asked two questions to assess perceptions of credibility. First, the participants rated how credible the alibi witness was (i.e. the person; to assess perceived witness honesty) and second, the participants rated the content of the alibi itself (i.e. the information; to assess perceived alibi accuracy). Analyses revealed that participants treated these as virtually identical questions and as such, the data are highly correlated, $r(122) = .80$, $p < .001$. Consequently, the scores on these two questions were combined into a composite score and a between subjects ANOVA was conducted on this "credibility" measure. There was not a significant interaction nor was there a significant main effect of relationship, (F's < 1). However, there was a significant main effect of Age, $F(1, 120) = 19.60$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .14$. The participants reported higher credibility ratings in the Child alibi witness conditions than in the Adult alibi witness conditions. See Table 1.
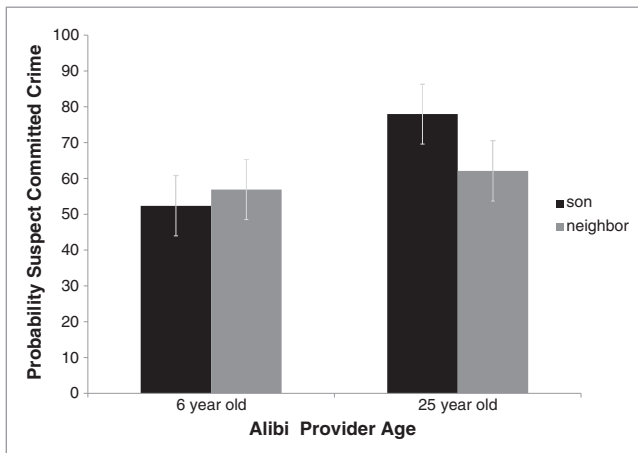
Figure 2. Mean probability ratings that the suspect committed the crime post-alibi. Error bars = 95% CIs based on a pooled estimate of variability.[2]

Final arrest decision

There were no significant main effects or interactions using a Log Linear analysis to examine participants' willingness to arrest their suspect (all p's > .20). See Table 2 for frequency data.

DISCUSSION

Impact of alibi

In the present study, we found that the existence of an alibi almost always reduced the perception of suspect culpability. Comparing pre-alibi with post-alibi ratings of the probability that their suspect had committed the crime, overall participants thought it was less likely that their suspect committed the crime after they had viewed the alibi. However, this finding was primarily driven by alibis provided by children: when participants viewed a child-provided alibi, they believed it was less likely that their suspect committed the crime. Yet, when an adult supported the suspect's alibi, participants' beliefs regarding the guilt of their suspect did not change significantly. Post-hoc analyses revealed that other than in the adult son condition, post-alibi ratings of guilt were lower than pre-alibi ratings of guilt (that is, suspects were judged less likely to have committed the crime after viewing the alibi), but in the adult son condition, participants' ratings of their suspect's guilt actually increased after they received the alibi. This suggests that the alibi provided by the adult son was not seen as exculpatory evidence, rather that participants actually interpreted it as incriminating evidence. Consistent with this, the examination of post-alibi ratings of suspect's guilt show those participants rated the suspect as most likely to be guilty in the adult son condition.

---

[2] The pooled estimate is the error term for the between-subjects factor in the ANOVA analysis. Pooling the estimates of variability provides a more stable estimate of variability. Given the pooled estimate of variability, it is appropriate to compare the different between-subjects conditions with one another using the error bars. (See Masson & Loftus, 2003, for a complete explanation of the computation and use of these confidence intervals.)

Table 1. Combined credibility scores of the alibi/alibi witness

	Suspect's son	Suspect's neighbor
Child witness	4.65 (2.02)	4.92 (2.09)
Adult witness	3.21 (1.63)	3.54 (1.76)

Table 2. Frequency of participant-investigators who would arrest their suspect

	Suspect's son	Suspect's neighbor
Child witness	14/31	15/31
Adult witness	13/31	9/31

Importance of relationship status

When we examine only the post-alibi ratings of likely guilt, we replicated previous alibi studies (e.g. Olson & Wells, 2004; Hosch et al., 2011) reporting that participants are more likely to believe an alibi when that alibi is provided by an unrelated adult alibi witness. We found that when the alibi was provided by an adult neighbor, participant-investigators thought it was less likely that their suspect committed the crime than when the alibi was provided by the suspect's adult son. However, the current study is the first of our knowledge to find that this association between alibi witness relationship status and alibi believability may only hold true with adult alibi witnesses. We interpret this pattern of results to indicate that honesty was more important to our participant-investigators than was cognitive competence, as children were consistently perceived as more credible alibi witnesses than adults. Further, in the child conditions, the participants were unaffected by relationship to the suspect. Hosch et al. (2011) proposed that kinship altruism may be a reason that we are more willing to lie for family members than for strangers, and why we are, therefore, more skeptical of related alibi witnesses. Researchers have found that children as young as 6 years old are capable of altruistic acts (e.g. Marcus, 1986; Zahn-Waxler, Radke-Yarrow, Wagner and Chapman, 1992). However, given that our participant-investigators were not affected by relationship status in the child alibi conditions, kinship altruism cannot explain these results. Perhaps, investigators were unaware, or unwilling to believe, that a child age presented here was capable of such altruism. Further research with varying ages of children may elucidate this possible explanation of the data.

Investigators appeared heavily influenced by the child alibi witnesses. The finding that child alibi witnesses were more believable than adult alibi witnesses is an exciting addition to the literature on the perceived credibility of children as witnesses. The observed pattern of results makes clear that child alibi witnesses are indeed likely to be perceived as more honest than adult alibi witnesses, and adds to a literature distinguishing between the contributions of honesty and cognitive competence to perceptions of child witnesses (e.g. Bottoms, 1993; Connolly et al., 2010; Ross et al., 2003). In an attempt to more explicitly disentangle the relative contributions of perceptions of children's honesty and cognitive competence to overall alibi evaluations, the participants in the present study were posed two final questions evaluating

both the alibi witness and the content of the alibi itself. Unfortunately, as noted above, the participants viewed these questions as essentially the identical and were unable to provide unique information that allowed for a closer examination of these factors. In future research, it will be important to further explore the explicit contribution of each of these factors, perhaps by varying the content of the alibi to more directly portray either honesty or accuracy as a more salient variable.

Alibi credibility

We did not observe a significant interaction on the assessment of alibi and witness credibility; however, this may be due to a floor effect as overall, scores were fairly low. Previous research has also found low ratings of alibi credibility, even when the alibi provided is quite strongly in favor of the defendant (e.g. Olson & Wells; 2004). Olson and Wells attribute this to participants' overall cynicism towards alibis in general. Therefore, even though participants were strongly affected by the alibi in all conditions, they reported that they did not find the alibis to be particularly credible in any condition (Table 1). As such, we found a disconnect between how participants said they viewed the alibi (not very credible) and how they were affected by it (especially in the child alibi conditions). That is, even though they rated the child alibi as more credible than the adult alibi, the credibility scores were still quite low overall. This pattern of findings evinces a lack of insight on the part of the participants as to what evidence impacts their decision-making.

Willingness to arrest

The participant-investigators were seemingly unaffected by the alibi when it came to the decision of whether to arrest the suspect or not. In fact, the participants were extremely hesitant to arrest the suspect given the information that they had received. When subsequently asked why they would or would not arrest the suspect, the most common reason cited for not arresting the suspect was a lack of physical evidence against the suspect. Perhaps, the emerging (though not established) phenomena of the "CSI effect" (i.e. elevated expectations about the type and quality of evidence that should be presented at trial as a result of watching crime drama television) are the potential explanation for such comments (e.g. Casey & Mohr, 2005).

Limitations

This study used undergraduate participants who role-played being police investigators. Needless to say, their training, life experience, and expertise are substantially different from police investigators when it comes to police procedures and investigations. It may be that the level of expertise of real police officers leads them to make decisions in a qualitatively different way from undergraduate participants. However, prior research provides little support for the idea that police investigators differ qualitatively from lay people in their ability to make other judgments, including detection of deception, regardless of whether they are trying to detect that deception in adults or in children (e.g. Ekman & O'Sullivan, 1991; Porter, Woodworth, & Birt, 2000; Vrij, Akehurst, Brown, &

Mann, 2006). Simply, being a police officer does not make one an expert in children and their capabilities at a particular age to lie successfully (i.e. to have the cognitive skills to purposefully and believably lie to protect one's father), or to judge children's abilities to accurately recall an event. However, it is possible that police investigators would be generally more skeptical of alibis overall (e.g. Burke & Turtle, 2003). Even so, it is unclear how police officers would view an alibi provided by a child witness. Therefore, further research with a police sample is recommended.

A second limitation of the present work is the measure of credibility evaluations. To measure honesty and cognitive competence of the alibi and alibi provider, only one question was posed per construct. As discussed previously, the participants treated these two questions as virtually the same, resulting in a high correlation between responses. In retrospect, clearer instructions making it more obvious (e.g. Ross et al., 2003) that we were seeking an evaluation of the person separate from the evidence or deriving this data from a composite of related questions as has been performed in previous research would have allowed for insight into the 2-factor model of credibility that we simply do not have.

CONCLUSION

This research is the first of our knowledge to test how participant-investigators are influenced by an alibi provided by a child as compared with an alibi provided by an adult. Importantly, we found that the association between alibi witness relationship status and alibi believability, already so clearly established in the literature, did not hold true with child witnesses. Given the cases of Kennedy Brewer, Alan Newton, and James O'Donnell, it is important that we gain a better understanding of how police investigators and jurors assess child alibi witnesses, as we know that children are asked to testify in real cases. We believe this study is an important first step in the examination of the believability of child alibi witnesses and the factors that influence assessments of these witnesses.

REFERENCES

Adelman, L., Tolcott, M. A., & Bresnick, T. A. (1993). Examining the effect of information order on expert judgment. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 56, 348–369.
Bottoms, B. L. (1993). Individual differences in perceptions of child sexual assault victims. In G. S. Goodman, & B. L. Bottoms (Eds.), *Child victims, child witnesses: Understanding and improving testimony* (pp. 229–261). New York: Guilford Press.
Burke, T. M., & Turtle, J. W. (2003). Alibi evidence in criminal investigations and trials: Psychological and legal factors. *Canadian Journal of Police and Security Services*, 3, 286–294.
Burke, T. M., Turtle, J. W., & Olson, E. A. (2007). Alibis in criminal investigations and trials. In M. P. Toglia, D. F. Ross, J. D. Read, & R. C. L. Lindsay

(Eds.), *Handbook of eyewitness psychology: Memory for events* (pp.157–174). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum and Associates.

Casey, S., & Mohr, P. (2005). Law-and-Order politics, public-polls and the media. *Psychiatry, Psychology and Law*, *12*, 141–151.

Connolly, D. A., Price, H. L., & Gordon, H. M. (2010). Judicial decision-making in timely and delayed prosecutions of child sexual abuse in Canada: A study of honesty and cognitive ability in assessments of credibility. *Psychology, Public Policy, and Law*, *16*, 177–199.

Culhane, S. E., & Hosch, H. M. (2004). An alibi witness's influence on jurors' verdicts. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, *34*, 1604–1616.

Culhane, S. E., Hosch, H. M., & Kehn, A. (2008). Alibi generation: Data from U.S. Hispanics and U.S. Non-Hispanic whites. *Journal of Ethnicity in Criminal Justice*, *6*, 177–199.

Dahl, L. C., Brimacombe, C. A. E., & Lindsay, D. S. (2009). Investigating investigators: How presentation order influences participant-investigators' interpretations of eyewitness identification and alibi evidence. *Law and Human Behavior*, *33*, 368–380.

Dahl, L. C., Lindsay, D. S., & Brimacombe, C. A. E. (2006). Investigating investigators: Examining witnesses' influence on investigators. *Law and Human Behavior*, *30*, 707–732.

Ekman, P., & O'Sullivan, M. (1991). Who can catch a liar? *American Psychologist*, *46*, 913–920.

Hosch, H. M., Culhane, S. E., Jolly, K. W., Chavez, R. M., & Hawley, L. R. (2011). Effects of an alibi witness's relationship to the defendant on mock jurors' judgments. *Law and Human Behavior*, *35*, 127–142.

Leippe, M. R., Manion, A. P., & Romanczyk, A. (1992). Eyewitness persuasion: How and how well do fact finders judge the accuracy of adults' and children's memory reports? *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *63*, 181–197.

Lindsay, R. C. L., Lim, R., Marando, L., & Cully, D. (1986). Mock juror evaluations of eyewitness testimony: A test of metamemory hypothesis. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, *15*, 447–459.

Marcus, R. F. (1986) Naturalistic observation of cooperation, helping, and sharing and their association with empathy and affect. In C. Zahn-Waxler, E. M. Cummings, & R. Iannotti (Eds.), *Altruism and aggression: Biological and social origins* (pp. 256–279). Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.

Masson, M. E. J., & Loftus, G. R. (2003). Using confidence intervals for graphically based data interpretation. *Canadian Journal of Experimental Psychology*, *57*, 203–220.

McAllister, H. A., & Bregman, N. J. (1989). Juror underutilization of eyewitness nonidentifications: A test of the disconfirmed expectancy explanation. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, *19*, 20–29.

McCauley, M. R., & Parker, J. F. (2001). When will a child be believed? The impact of the victim's age and juror's gender on children's credibility and verdict in a sexual-abuse case. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, *25*, 523–539.

Olson, E. A., & Wells, G. L. (2004). What makes a good alibi? A proposed taxonomy. *Law and Human Behavior*, *28*, 157–176.

Porter, S., Woodworth, M., & Birt, A. R. (2000). Truth, lies, and videotape: An investigation of the ability of federal parole officers to detect deception. *Law and Human Behavior*, *24*, 643–658.

Ross, D. F., Jurden, F. H., Lindsay, R. C. L., & Keeney, J. M. (2003). Replication and limitations of a two-factor model of child witness credibility. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, *33*, 418–431.

Sommers, S. R., & Douglass, A. B. (2007). Context matters: Alibi strength varies according to evaluator perspective. *Legal and Criminological Psychology*, *12*, 41–54.

The Innocence Project. (2011). Retrieved from: http://www.innocenceproject.org [3 December 2011]

Vrij, A., Akehurst, L., Brown, L., & Mann, S. (2006). Detecting lies in young children, adolescents and adults. *Applied Cognitive Psychology*, *20*, 1225–1237.

Zahn-Waxler, C., Radke-Yarrow, M., Wagner, E., & Chapman, M. (1992). Development of concern for others. *Developmental Psychology*, *28*, 126–136.