

Investigative interviewers' perceptions of their difficulty in adhering to open-ended questions with child witnesses

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Received 3 November 2005; accepted 6 December 2005.

Keywords: training; questioning; child witnesses; interviewing techniques; vulnerable witnesses.

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Professor Martine Powell is one of the leading Australian authorities on the topic of forensic interviewing of children. Over the past 13 years, she has been an active researcher and trainer in this area, delivering regular Australia-wide workshops on interviewing children and other vulnerable witness groups (eg people from different cultural backgrounds) to a wide range of professionals. She has assisted in the review and/or development of nine formal training courses for investigative interviewers of children.

indicates that most investigative interviewers underutilise open-ended questions, even following intensive training in their use. The aim of the current study was to explore investigative interviewers' perceptions of their difficulty in asking open-ended questions. During a training course on how to use open-ended questions, eight child abuse investigators were individually interviewed about why they had asked specific questions in a 10-minute mock interview conducted immediately earlier with a school child. Overall, three reasons were identified. These related to: 1. the specificity of the information required from children; 2. the unfamiliar nature of the open-ended discourse style; and 3. the complex distinction between open-ended versus specific questions. Each of these themes is discussed, along with the implications for trainers and researchers in child investigative interviewing.

ABSTRACT

Best practice guidelines for conducting investigative interviews of children emphasise the importance of obtaining free narrative accounts with the use of open-ended questions. However, research

INTRODUCTION

In cases of suspected child abuse, children are usually crucial witnesses. To ensure that the evidence obtained from children about abuse is both accurate and admissible in court, investigative interviewers require

special training (Powell, 2002). There is international consensus that investigative interviewers should ensure that children tell their own accounts, without being prompted with specific questions. Hence, a 'free narrative account' using non-focused, open-ended questioning is the method recommended in contemporary interview protocols (Poole & Lamb, 1998). A free narrative account is an account of the event or situation told in the child's own words, at his or her own pace, and without interruption (Fisher, 1995). The account is generally elicited by asking open-ended questions, which require multiple-word responses and allow interviewees the flexibility to choose which aspects of the event they will describe.

The rationale for using open-ended questions is that responses to these questions are usually more accurate than responses to specific or closed questions (Lipton, 1977). Essentially this is because open-ended questions are interviewee focused. They allow the interviewee time to collect his or her thoughts, consequently promoting elaborate memory retrieval. Excessive use of specific or 'wh' questions¹ — as opposed to asking fewer open-ended questions — is distracting for witnesses because the specific questions redirect the witness' attention from searching internally through memory to focusing externally on the interviewer's questions (Powell, Fisher, & Wright, 2005). Further, specific questions inevitably increase error rates due to response biases (tendencies of witnesses to provide answers without reflection) and to false recognition of details contained in specific questions (Roberts & Powell, 2001). While open-ended questions are recommended for all witness groups (irrespective of age), the utilisation of these questions is particularly important when interviewing children whose language and cognitive abilities are not as well developed as that of adults.

Given the importance of eliciting free narrative accounts from child witnesses, this method is taught to all child abuse investigators (eg police officers and social workers) when they undergo training in investigative interviewing. However, evidence indicates that, in practice, most of these professionals do not use this method when interviewing children. Instead, investigative interviewers mostly ask specific questions, which risk contaminating the child's account. Overall, it seems that training in investigative interviewing is generally successful in enhancing interviewers' knowledge of appropriate techniques, however it has little long-term impact on interviewing styles (Warren et al., 1999). While trainers and curriculum writers are committed to the dissemination of best practice guidelines, the provision of guidelines on how to interview children has had little long-term impact on practice (Sternberg, Lamb, Davies, & Westcott, 2001). Indeed, research in Australia, the UK, US and Europe indicates that most trained investigative interviewers do not elicit complete narrative accounts of events from children (see Powell, Fisher, & Wright, 2005, for a review). Although interviewers can usually generate examples of open-ended questions (eg they start the child talking about the alleged offence with a broad question such as 'Tell me everything that happened from beginning to end'), they have difficulty *maintaining* open-ended questions (Davies & Wilson, 1997). On average, less than 25 per cent of information reported by children in field interviews is elicited with open-ended questions or free narrative prompts (Warren et al.). The recommended percentage is three times that amount (Wilson & Powell, 2001).

So what are the barriers to utilising open-ended questions? How could training of investigative interviewers be improved? Considerable research has highlighted the difficulties investigative interviewers have in eliciting accounts of offences from children.

However, we currently know very little about how expertise in interviewing is learnt and sustained. Indeed, most prior research has merely documented the number of open-ended questions utilised by interviewers (see Powell, 2002). Only one group of researchers to date (ie Lamb and colleagues at the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development in Washington) has attempted to investigate the factors that *promote* expertise in interviewing. These researchers reported that substantial improvements in the quality of forensic interviewing can be achieved by providing training to interviewers that incorporates three components: 1. intensive and continued post-training individual supervision and feedback by experts; 2. multiple 'refresher' training sessions; and 3. the adoption of structured interviews. This conclusion was supported by studies that showed an increase in interviewers' use of open-ended questions (and the later introduction of specific questions) with the adoption of these elements, and a decline in performance following a period of time where these techniques were not maintained (Lamb, Sternberg, Orbach, Esplin, & Mitchell, 2002a; Lamb et al., 2002b; Orbach et al., 2000; Sternberg, Lamb, Orbach, Esplin, & Mitchell, 2001).

Despite the important contribution of Lamb and colleagues' work, few specific practical solutions can be drawn for trainers at this stage, as research is still refining the precise manner in which practice and expert feedback can be delivered in a cost-effective yet global scale (Powell, 2002). Further, while research has examined the effectiveness of certain techniques in promoting change in pre- versus post-training performance, no study to date has determined the perceptions of trainee interviewers regarding their difficulties. For example; do investigative interviewers acknowledge their underuse of open-ended

questions? If so, what factors do they perceive are contributing to this problem? How important do they see the need to utilise these questions in interviews? These questions are obviously relevant for trainers and managers because individual trainees' knowledge, beliefs and perceptions play a major role in determining the effectiveness of any training programme (see McGeoch, 1947). In other words, the motivating condition of individuals during learning, and the individual's understanding of their own behaviour and the learning task are highly significant determiners of their behaviour in learning situations. If we know why interviewers revert to closed and specific questions, it might help us as trainers to develop methods that will facilitate the use and maintenance of open-ended questions among trainees.

The aim of the current study was to explore directly the difficulty experienced by a group of trainee investigative interviewers when attempting to maintain an open-ended interviewing style. The method employed was a 'think aloud' procedure which has been widely used in prior research to assess the thoughts of trainee participants immediately after they had been exposed to a practical exercise (Capioppo & Petty, 1981). Specifically, the interviewees in this study: 1. engaged in a mock interview with a child witness; 2. transcribed this interview; and 3. engaged in an individual interview, which focused on their perceptions during the interview and the reasons why they reverted to a specific questioning style.

METHOD

Participants and procedure

The trainees were four police officers and four child protection workers working full-time in the area of child protection or child abuse investigation. At the time of engaging

in this study, all the participants were completing a two-week intensive training programme relating to the investigation and assessment of child abuse and neglect. The trainees had various levels of experience in this area (ie some had been trained many years previously and were merely updating their knowledge whereas some were commencing their current positions). Further, six (out of eight) of the participants were female, which reflects the overall gender distribution in the field. Two days of the training programme were specifically devoted to interviewing techniques. The first day provided practical instruction in how to conduct investigative interviews with a child witness. This day was delivered by an expert in the area (the second author) who focused primarily on the procedure and benefits of an open-ended interviewing style. Throughout the day, the trainees were provided with a structured interview protocol, exemplars of open-ended questions and numerous case examples (role plays, film) which demonstrated how open-ended questions could be used effectively to elicit accounts of events from children.

On the second day of the two-day component on interviewing techniques, trainees were required to demonstrate their ability to use open-ended questions. This day was held at the state police academy and each trainee was required to participate in a number of activities. Initially the participants were required to conduct a 10-minute mock interview with a five- to six-year-old school child. During these mock interviews, the participants were required to use as many open-ended questions as possible to establish what *happened* in a staged event that the children engaged in that morning at the academy. The event involved three main activities: riding in a police car; visiting a dining room (called a 'mess'); and viewing some cannons (the academy was based at an old fort). Prior to partaking in the mock interview, all of the participants

had been told what allegedly occurred on the children's tour of the academy (which they were warned might or might not be accurate) as well as the types of details that needed to be established during this interview. The reason for these procedures is that it mimicked the context of many field interviews where investigative interviewers read prior information about what allegedly occurred before commencing the interview, and need to cover specific 'points of proof'.

Following the mock interview, the participants were required to transcribe verbatim and code their interviews in order to identify the proportion of different types of questions asked (eg open-ended versus specific questions). Finally, the participants received individual feedback from the second author which provided line-by-line analysis of their mock interview. With regard to the timing of the feedback, half of the participants received their feedback prior to engaging in the 'think aloud' interview with the first author, and the remainder received their feedback *after* taking part in the 'think aloud' interview. While this procedure was completed by all of the professionals who attended the training course ($N = 24$), only those who volunteered to partake in the current research (ie the 'think aloud' interview) were included. Nine participants provided consent and one was excluded because of time restraints. For practical reasons, all of the 'think aloud' interviews needed to be completed within the same day.

The 'think aloud' interviews were administered in a quiet room at the academy within three-and-a-half hours of the participants' completing their mock interview. During this interview (which lasted for an average of 17 minutes), the researcher facilitated discussion by asking structured questions about the participant's mock interview transcript. Examples of questions include; 'What thoughts were going through your mind when you asked the

child [specific question]?', 'Why did you interrupt the child when (s)he said . . .?', 'Talk me through what was happening in this segment'. In addition, the researcher invited the participants to reflect more generally about the mock interview experience, the open-ended questioning format and its perceived applicability to the field.

Data management and analysis

The 'think aloud' interviews were audio-taped and transcribed verbatim. Due to the small data set, the data were organised, coded and analysed manually. Thematic analysis, which involves the process of locating common patterns within a data set (Gifford, 1998), was used to analyse systematically the content of participants' responses regarding why they asked specific questions. The coding process was largely informed by the original research questions (Dey, 1993). Specifically, each 'think aloud' transcript was read thoroughly to identify common reasons offered by the participants for deviating from an open-ended questioning style. Three key themes emerged, including: 1. the specificity of the information required from children; 2. the unfamiliar nature of the open-ended discourse style; and 3. the complex distinction between open-ended versus specific questions. Finally, any strategies that the participants perceived did, or would likely assist them in overcoming each of the three key barriers are discussed.

RESULTS

The specificity of the information required from children

The most common reason for asking specific questions was the drive to elicit highly specific details. Trainees are aware that in order to be successful in the system in which they work, highly specific information is required to ascertain the legitimacy

of the notification being investigated (ie to establish corroborating evidence and to prove certain elements relating to the specific charge). While the current research involved a mock interview (where there was no specific charge per se), the participants' underlying drive to seek confirmation of specific prior information was demonstrated here in the same way that it underlies their drive in the field to elicit specific details to secure a conviction of abuse.

We're zoned in to investigating offences . . . We've got each element of crime that has to be proved and coming in today, my mindset was that we need to find out about those *three* things [activities mentioned prior to the interviews] . . . I think I was just preoccupied with those three things because we're just so used to having to get certain details to prove certain offences (female police officer).

I've been doing it for 20 years and I have been to court a lot . . . You get to know the type of questions that they [the witnesses] are going to get asked in court. It's about closing the loopholes basically (male police officer).

Indirectly, this theme appears to reflect an underlying assumption that in order to elicit specific information, the interviewer must ask a specific question (ie the information can not be elicited via an open-ended questioning style). For example, when asked, 'Why did you ask that specific question?' trainees usually responded, 'Because I needed to get that specific information'. Most of the trainee interviewers spoke of the difficulty of withholding prior information and just letting the child provide a narrative to see whether specific details arose spontaneously. Prejudging what information the child might disclose and planning the direction of the interview

further compounded this problem because it reduced the cognitive effort that interviewers had available to phrase questions appropriately (ie in a non-specific way).

I probably had in my mind the information that I wanted to elicit and I didn't feel that open-ended questions were leading her [the child] that way (female child protection worker).

The unfamiliar nature of the open-ended discourse style

The second major theme underlying the trainees' use of specific questions is the fact that such questions are habitual to them. According to the trainees, the open-ended questioning technique (as it was defined and relayed in the prior information session) was relatively unfamiliar to them. It had not been taught or used in other aspects of their job (eg when learning to interview adults). Even those who had considerable experience in the child abuse investigation field acknowledged that the 'best practice' interview techniques have evolved since they last received internal training. Adhering to the new approach was described as extremely mentally challenging and lapses in concentration frequently resulted in the reverting to specific questions.

I think I had a lapse in concentration and reverted back to the way I was trained years ago; the 'who', 'what', 'where', 'when', 'why' approach . . . I will have to make sure I maintain concentration and think on my feet while I'm interviewing until I get into the habit of using more open questions (female police officer).

Not only did the use of open-ended questions feel unnatural to the trainee interviewers, they correctly observed that it is an unfamiliar and relatively challenging style of discourse for many child interviewees as well. Children initially do not respond to

broad open-ended questions with detailed information. They usually provide a few general activities in their initial response and further open-ended questions are then required to assist them in elaborating on their previous response. Since narrative language ability is a developing skill for young children, there was marked variability in the degree of detail individual child interviewees provided in response to open-ended prompts. For some of the trainee interviewers, they felt mild anxiety or guilt about using open-ended questions when their child did not respond with detailed information. This anxiety in turn led to a compulsion to revert to specific questions, which are perceived to be easier for child witnesses to answer. Other trainee interviewers dealt with their anxiety by changing the topic in the hope that the child would find the new aspect easier to recount in his or her own words.

I started by asking the child 'Tell me about the first thing you did when you arrived today'. She said something and then she said I came here [to the interview room]. So all of a sudden she'd gone right to the end of her excursion . . . I asked 'What happened after that?' and she said 'Nothing'. So I've got nothing to move with . . . It felt like I had no choice but to go for a specific detail (female child protection worker).

Trainees did acknowledge, however, that the habit of asking specific questions is amenable to change over time with regular practice of open-ended questions. They identified several strategies that could, or did, assist them in preparing for the mock interview exercise. These included: repeating the phrase 'Tell me' over in their mind; rehearsing and memorising certain open-ended prompts; and writing prompts or possible questions in note form that could be referred to during the interview. Indeed,

prior planning and practice at home (eg with child relatives or their own children) played an important role in building the trainees' confidence. Further, it helped them to prepare for the interview and to monitor and anticipate their weaknesses.

The complex distinction between open-ended and specific questions

The final core theme underpinning trainees' use of specific questions relates to their confusion regarding precisely how open-ended questions are distinguished from specific questions. In other words, some trainee interviewers incorrectly thought they *were* asking open-ended questions during the mock interview exercise when in fact they were asking specific questions. While all the trainees had been exposed to a full day of expert instruction regarding the different types of open-ended questions and how they are used, the instruction was not entirely meaningful to them until it was explained in the context of their own interviews.

About 80 percent of mine [questions asked in the mock interview] were specific . . . Prior to getting the feedback, I thought they were open. But after the critical feedback, I realised they're not open and I now completely understand why (female police officer).

It is important to note that confusion regarding the distinction between open-ended and specific questions only arose among those trainees who had received expert feedback *prior* to participating in the think-aloud exercise. This of course raises the possibility that trainees who had not received expert feedback prior to the think-aloud exercise were equally confused about how the different question types are defined and used throughout the interview.

DISCUSSION

This paper sought to understand the perception of trainee investigative interviewers regarding the difficulty they experience in adhering to best practice guidelines in interviewing children (ie the maintenance of open-ended questions). While each of the participant trainees in this study acknowledged the importance of, and difficulty in, adhering to an open-ended questioning style, several clear barriers were identified. These barriers include: 1. the specificity of the information required from children; 2. the unfamiliar nature of the open-ended discourse style; and 3. the complex distinction between open-ended and specific questions. These barriers will be discussed in turn, along with their implications for trainers and researchers in child investigative interviewing.

First, the trainee interviewers rightly acknowledged that any successful investigative interview with a child requires the elicitation of specific case-related details. Child abuse investigations are frequently characterised by a lack of corroborating evidence, such as physical or medical evidence, and non-victim witness statements (Fisher, Geiselman, & Raymond, 1987). This makes alleged child victims' accounts of the suspected incidents of paramount importance. Although some jurisdictions allow prosecution of alleged child abuse to proceed with a general account of the abuse from the child, the norm in most English-speaking countries is that the child must provide enough *detailed* contextual information to identify an individual incident of the offence in time or place. This includes where and when the incident occurred, who was there and the precise acts that occurred in sequence (*S v. The Queen*, (1989)).²

One contribution of the current research is that it has highlighted a dilemma faced by trainers in investigative interviewing

when trying to relay the importance of an open-ended questioning style. On the one hand, children's ability to narrate an event in their own words (the very substance of a good investigative interview) depends largely on skills that are still 'under construction' in a typically developing child. Unless the interviewer persists with an open-ended interviewing style, and refrains from interrupting the child with excessive questioning, children are not provided the opportunity to engage in the type of elaborate memory retrieval that is required to elicit a detailed narrative account. On the other hand, until interviewers have mastered the art of open-ended questions, they are not truly convinced of their benefit — they assume that specific event details can only be elicited via specific questions. This belief, in turn, reduces the likelihood that trainee interviewers will persist with an open-ended interviewing style.

Another barrier that seems to underlie the trainee interviewers' difficulties in maintaining an open-ended interviewing style includes the unfamiliar nature of open-ended discourse. In other words, the trainee interviewers' prior experiences and training (which had reinforced the use of specific 'wh' questions) impeded their ability to learn the skill of asking open-ended questions, which is a relatively unnatural and novel skill. This theme is not surprising. It is well established that people in English-speaking countries commonly use the sequential specific question-and-answer style of conversation in their daily interactions (Powell, 2000). Further, it is well established that prior experiences and learning play a large role in dictating current performance (McGeoch, 1947). The trainee interviewers' comments highlight the potential value of receiving training in the use of open-ended questions at the early stages of their careers, not merely when they seek a specialised position in the area

of child abuse investigation. This is consistent with the view of experts who argue that open-ended questioning should be the basis of *any* forensic interview, even those with adult witnesses or alleged offenders (Milne & Bull, 1999).

With regard to the trainees' comments about 'wh' questions being habitual, it is interesting to note that their difficulties reflected more than just a problem of *doing* (ie refraining from regressing to habitual or earlier learned procedures). The trainees clearly identified a 'cognitive' problem. In other words, despite a full day of instruction from an expert the previous day, they still had difficulty distinguishing between open-ended and specific questions. Because this problem was only identified by the interviewees who had already received expert feedback from the instructor, it suggests that the problem was not solely due to problems in monitoring their use of open-ended questions *during* the interview process. Prior to the think-aloud interviews, all participants were required to transcribe and then code the questions they used in their interviews. As the trainees who had expert feedback acknowledged, it was only *after* the trainer had conducted a line-by-line dissection of their interviews that they realised why many of the seemingly open-ended questions they asked were, in fact, specific questions.

Overall, there are three practical implications of the current findings. First, the findings highlight the critical role of individual expert feedback in the actual learning process. Second, the findings indicate that considerable time needs to be devoted in training courses to helping participants *perceive* first-hand the value and usefulness of an open-ended interview style with children. How effectively this can be done obviously depends on time and funding restraints, and the resources available to individual trainers. One method may be to show trainee interviewers samples of field

interviews where open-ended questions are being used effectively with young children. While access to field tapes may be restricted in some jurisdictions by legal restraints surrounding the use of tapes for training purposes, it may be possible to show samples of interviews with school children who are being interviewed about innocuous events by interviewers who have mastered the open-ended technique. Another method of demonstrating the value of open-ended questions is to help trainee interviewers master the use of these questions *prior* to having them trial the techniques with actual children. The provision of multiple practice opportunities does demand considerable cost if there are few internal trainers with sufficient expertise to offer expert supervision. However, this can be facilitated by links with local researchers who can access funding and resources (eg trained assistants who can play the role of a child) for the purpose of conducting research on the value of different training techniques.

Finally, this research has highlighted the value of conducting in-depth interviews with individual trainees about their perceptions and experiences of mock training exercises. While the sample recruited in the current study was small, the rich yield of data obtained in the think-aloud interviews has raised many interesting questions that could be examined in future research regarding the effectiveness of training exercises in investigative interviewing. These questions include:

- How effective are practice exercises in changing trainees' beliefs about the value of open-ended questions?
- Are different mock interview exercises (eg interviews with a child, interviews with an adult actor) differentially effective at various stages of trainees' skill development?
- What is the precise role of expert feedback in shaping trainee interviewers'

behaviour and how should this feedback be best delivered?

Given the critical role that investigative interviewers play in the legal process, and the apparent ineffectiveness of training programmes globally (see Powell, Fisher, & Wright, 2005), it is time that researchers started to focus their attention on these important issues.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This research was funded by an Australian Research Council Linkage Grant (LP0347170). The authors would like to thank Rosemary Steen and the trainees from the South Australia Police Service and the South Australia Children Youth and Family Services who participated in this research. This work was completed as a partial requirement of the first author's Doctor of Philosophy degree.

NOTES

- (1) 'Wh' questions include who, what, when, where, and how questions. These questions dictate what specific information is required and usually elicit only one- or two-word responses.
- (2) (1989) 168 CLR 266.

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