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What makes a good investigative interviewer of children?

A comparison of police officers' and experts' perceptions

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to examine police officers' perceptions about their role in interviewing children, and to compare these perceptions with those of child eyewitness memory experts.

Design/methodology/approach – A diverse sample of 23 police officers (from three states of Australia) individually participated in in-depth interviews where they were asked to define what makes a good interviewer in the area of child abuse investigation.

Findings – Irrespective of the background of the officers, the important role of interviewers' personal attributes was emphasised (e.g. having a relaxed, empathetic, warm nature). Such personal attributes were more prominent in the participants' descriptions than knowledge of legislation and children's development, prior job experience, and interviewing techniques.

Research limitations/implications – The paper shows that while child eyewitness memory experts acknowledge the importance of establishing a bond of mutual trust between the interviewer and the child, the importance of utilising an open-ended questioning style for enhancing rapport, and for eliciting a detailed and accurate account of abuse cannot be overstated. The possible reasons for the police officers' emphasis on personal qualities are discussed.

Originality/value – This paper has revealed that limitations in the competency of police officers in interviewing children is not merely a problem of “doing” (i.e. learning to ask open-ended questions), but may also reflect ingrained attitudinal and organisational barriers.

The act of eliciting reliable and detailed information from a child about abuse is a complex process that requires specialised skills in forensic interviewing. The aim of any investigative interview (irrespective of the witness) is to elicit the most accurate and detailed account of the alleged offence in a manner that does not place undue stress on the respondent (Milne and Bull, 1999). Maximising the quantity and quality of information increases the likelihood of obtaining corroborative evidence to support the interviewee's account. Corroborative evidence, in turn, increases the likelihood that successful prosecution will result (Davis *et al.*, 1999, Fisher *et al.*, 1987). The important role that investigative interviewers play within the legal process cannot be overstated. A properly conducted interview advances an investigation immeasurably by eliciting a thorough, accurate record of the crime details. On the other hand, a poorly conducted interview can distort the witness' memory, which can be detrimental for the entire investigative process.

Currently there is clear international consensus regarding the most effective way of conducting an investigative interview about abuse with a child. The central aim of all prominent investigative interview protocols for children is to obtain an account of the alleged offence in the child's own words, with as little specific prompting as possible from the interviewer (Poole and Lamb, 1998, Wilson and Powell, 2001). Research has consistently shown that such an account, referred to as a “free-narrative” account, is elicited with the use of broad open-ended questions and other prompts that encourage elaborate responses, but allow the witness flexibility to report what information they remember. Few, but carefully constructed, questions are used to maximise the amount of accurate information in this crucial interview phase (see, Powell and Snow, in press, for a review). The problem with specific questions is that they inevitably increase error rates (compared to when witnesses volunteer accounts in their own words). This is due to response biases (witness' tendencies to provide answers without reflection) and to false recognition of details contained in specific questions (Roberts and Powell, 2001).

The ability of investigative interviewers to maintain the use of non-leading open-ended questions, and to minimise the use of specific questions, is critical to the elicitation of a reliable account from a child. However, evidence indicates that most investigative interviewers do not use open-ended questions. Indeed, while the open-ended method is taught to all police and child protection workers when they undergo training in investigative interviewing throughout the US, Europe and Australia, the majority of training programs are having little long-term impact on interviewers' practice (Powell *et al.*, 2005). A consistent finding across all evaluation studies is that investigative interviewers mostly ask specific questions, even in the early stages of the interview when a free-narrative account is crucial. Although interviewers can usually generate examples of open-ended questions (e.g., they can 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 keeping the free narrative going (Davies and Wilson, 1997). On average, less than 25 percent of information reported by children in field interviews is elicited with open-ended questions or free-

narrative prompts (Cederborg *et al.*, 2000, Sternberg *et al.*, 2001a). The ideal is three times that amount (Wilson and Powell, 2001).

Professionals' difficulties in adhering to "best practice" interview guidelines reflect several unique characteristics of the investigative interview process. These characteristics include the specificity of the detail required for successful prosecution of child abuse, limitations in children's memory and language development, and the unfamiliar nature of the open-ended discourse style (specific questions are more commonly used in English-speaking countries, see Powell, 2000). One of the problems for trainers is that although prior research has highlighted the benefit of using open-ended questions, as well as interviewers' difficulties in maintaining these questions, we currently know very little about how expertise in interviewing is learnt and sustained. Most prior research has merely demonstrated the ineffectiveness of training programs by comparing interviewers' performance pre- and post-training (see Powell *et al.*, 2005, for a review). Only one group of researchers to date (Lamb and colleagues) has investigated the factors that promote the use of "best-practice" interview guidelines. Overall, the work by Lamb and colleagues has shown that substantial improvements in the outcome of interview training programs can be achieved by providing:

- Multiple practice sessions.
- Regular supervision and feedback.
- The adoption of structured interviews protocols including example questions (see Powell *et al.*, 2005, for a review).

This conclusion was based on studies that showed an increase in interviewers' use of open-ended questions with the adoption of these elements, and a decline in performance following a period of time when these techniques were not maintained (Lamb *et al.*, 2002a, b; Orbach *et al.*, 2000, Sternberg *et al.*, 2001b).

Research is still in its infancy, however, and further work is needed to identify ways to improve the competency of investigative interviewers. One new aspect worth examining is the way police officers perceive and define a good investigative interviewer of children. This is an important consideration for trainers because police officers' beliefs and perceptions regarding their role, and how expertise in interviewing is achieved, would moderate the effectiveness of formal training programs in interviewing. The aim of the current study was to address this issue by examining police officers' perceptions about their role in interviewing children. The participants involved 23 police officers, who were all based in child abuse investigation units throughout three states of Australia. Specifically, each officer engaged in an in-depth interview, which included the prompts: define a good investigative interviewer in the area of child abuse investigation? What aspects, qualities or skills are important? These questions were followed by open-ended prompts to clarify the reason for their response and how (if any) they came to be working in this area.

Method

Participants

The participants included 23 police officers, located across three states of Australia. Note that the police officers were all employed in child abuse units and were primarily responsible for responding to complaints of suspected abuse (both current and historic matters). The participants were recruited with the assistance of managerial staff in 14 different child abuse investigation units. Managers were approached initially, to explain the purpose of the research and to seek the names of potential participants. After receiving a list of names, potential participants were approached, all of whom consented to partake in the individual interviews. The final sample size was determined by data saturation, that is, when no new information was being obtained about the topics of inquiry (see Sim and Wright, 2000).

We intentionally recruited a diverse sample of participants, using a technique referred to as “maximum variation sampling”. This method enabled the researchers to examine the breadth of the phenomenon of study and to identify themes that were common across a wide range of child abuse investigators (Patton, 1990). Demographic details, which were sought from the participants at the time of the interview, confirmed that the sample was indeed heterogenous. It consisted of 12 female and 11 male police officers, with approximately equal numbers of officers from three eastern states of Australia. Within each state, participants came from diverse areas including metropolitan units ($n=15$), large rural centres ($n=5$), and small rural centres ($n=4$). Further, their level of experience in the field of child abuse investigation ranged from two months to 17 years ($M=5.6$ years), and in the police force in general, three to 24 years ($M=10.8$ years). The ranks of the officers ranged from constable to detective sergeant¹.

Procedure

The individual in-depth interviews were conducted by the first author, and ranged in duration from 40 to 100 minutes. All interviews were conducted at the participants' workplace, except in one case where the participant preferred to meet in a local café. A semi-structured interview schedule was used to generate discussion about a range of themes relating to police officers' experiences of conducting child abuse investigations. The current paper however, focuses solely on participants' narratives regarding interviewing children about abuse. The police officers were asked about their experiences of interviewing children and what they perceive makes a good investigative interviewer of children. Importantly, the broad nature of the questions asked and the recursive or conversational style of interviewing adopted by the researcher allowed the participants to direct the discussion toward experiences and concerns that were personally relevant, and to attribute their own meaning to these experiences. The interviewer was a largely passive participant in the conversation at all times, asking only broad open-ended questions to encourage further elaboration and to seek clarification of comments made by the participants.

Data management and analysis

All of the interviews were audio taped, transcribed verbatim and double-checked for accuracy. While the in-depth interviews covered a range of issues (see, Wright *et al.*, in press, for more information), this paper examines participants' responses to two prompts (define a good investigative interviewer in the area of child abuse investigation? What

aspects, qualities or skills are most important?), which were analysed using content analysis. Content analysis involves grouping specific words in a text (i.e. participants answers to the above mentioned question) into specific categories, which are then sorted and counted to identify the number of occurrences of each theme (Gifford, 1998).

The primary researcher began by actively reading each of the transcripts in order to identify and understand the breadth of themes, which the officers used to define a good investigative interviewer (Dey, 1993). These themes were subsequently discussed and debated with the collaborating author and a coding protocol was developed in order to code the content of participants' responses in a rigorous and comparable way. Specifically, four themes emerged which encapsulated all of the varying responses provided by the participants. These were:

1. Personal interviewer attributes (e.g. aspects characteristic or inherent within the individual).
2. Interviewer knowledge regarding procedure, legislation, children's development, etc.
3. Interviewers' prior experience interacting with children (both job and family-related experiences).
4. Interviewing techniques.

Results

All of the participants acknowledged that interviewing children was a critical component of their job. Further, they perceived child abuse investigation as highly complex and demanding (more so than some initially anticipated when entering this line of work), due to the vulnerable nature of their client group and the requirements imposed by the law to obtain highly specific evidence. Cases of child abuse are typically characterised by a lack of corroborating evidence (e.g. physical evidence, medical evidence, and non-victim witness statements). Thus there is considerable reliance on victims to provide highly specific details (e.g. details related to time, place and context) in their testimony. Although it is difficult for all witnesses to recall highly specific details related to time and place, it is especially difficult for children whose understanding of time and ability to monitor the source of memories, is not as developed as that of adults.

With regard to the issue of what makes a good investigative interviewer of children, there was considerable consistency in the interviewer's responses. Irrespective of the interviewers' background or experience, the characteristics most commonly perceived to be important were personal in nature (i.e. associated with certain personality traits) as opposed to behaviours that can be learned.

Some are good interviewers and others are not. There is just something about interviewing children that cannot be learned. Something on a more personal level which makes some people naturally better than others (female acting sergeant).

Some people have a natural aptitude for working with children (male senior constable).

While other characteristics of effective interviewers were deemed important, such as prior job experience, knowledge, and interviewing techniques, these were not major themes of the interviews. For instance, only ten participants mentioned the importance of the interviewing technique when describing the qualities of a good investigative interviewer of children. Of those ten participants, only two acknowledged the importance of using open-ended questions.

So what personal characteristics were deemed important to being a competent interviewer? Many of the participants felt that professionals whose personality is naturally “softer” and more “caring” (e.g. relaxed, friendly, empathetic, warm, and sensitive or attentive to the needs of others) were more effective interviewers. Further, some participants felt that being female was an advantage because many child victims of abuse are female and therefore feel more comfortable talking with professionals of the same gender. The emphasis on these qualities was that they assist in establishing a bond or relationship based on trust with the child victim. Such a relationship was deemed critical for eliciting honest or accurate disclosures of sensitive, embarrassing or traumatic material. Other participants perceived that personal characteristics associated with the ability to communicate with people (e.g. good listening skills, patience, an interest in helping others) were important.

I guess it's predominantly patience and the ability to make the child comfortable in your presence (female senior constable).

I think gender is probably important because a lot of our victims are female. I think a lot of young females feel more comfortable speaking to a female interviewer ... Kids are really perceptive so I think a more open, friendly manner is important (female constable).

The important role that personal attributes were perceived to play (compared to the other categories of responses) was evident in three ways. First, a mean of 4.5 (SD = 1.97) separate comments were made in each interview about the role of personal interviewer attributes. This mean was significantly higher than that for comments made about the importance of knowledge ($M=0.87$, $SD=1.29$, $t(22)=6.96$, $p < 0.001$), prior job experience ($M=0.70$, $SD=0.88$, $t(22)=8.82$, $p < 0.001$), and interviewing techniques ($M=0.65$, $SD=0.88$, $t(22)=9.25$), $p < 0.001$). Second, comments relating to the interviewer's personal attributes represented 67 percent of all comments about what makes a good investigative interviewer of children. This proportion is more than five times that for each of the other categories of responses (knowledge – 13 percent, prior job experience – 11 percent, and interviewing techniques – 9 percent). Third, references to the interviewers' personal attributes marked the opening statement of 16 (out of the 23) participants' responses to the question of what makes a good interviewer. This indicates that the personal attributes were at the forefront of many of the participants' minds.

Interestingly, despite the fact that many participants emphasised the importance of personal attributes, many did not initially anticipate that they would be working in this area, and were not entirely aware of what the job entailed when they accepted the position in the child abuse unit. Reasons stated for transferring into the area of child abuse investigation included convenience, such as lifestyle reasons (e.g. family, work hours, place

of residence), dissatisfaction in their previous job, and requirements within the organisation regarding mandatory rotation. Only nine of the participants reported making a concerted effort to enter the area of child abuse and this was primarily associated with a desire to help people or because they were specifically interested in the work.

My boss at the time thought that it was preferable to move around. He started making suggestions that I move to a different town or duty type. There was a vacancy in the child protection team and it was a way of me remaining in (town) and remaining a detective. I married a local and he didn't want to leave (town) so it was basically a matter of convenience that I took the position (female detective senior constable).

Although the participants emphasised the importance of the interviewer's personal attributes in defining an expert interviewer, they also acknowledged that interviewers need to adhere to certain procedural or legal requirements that must be met for successful prosecution of child abuse. In other words, "good" interviewers (i.e. those with certain personal attributes) do not always do "good" interviews. A good interview was deemed to depend on whether the evidence elicited was sufficient for successful prosecution. In relation to this aspect, there was some anxiety and uncertainty among the participants regarding the quality of their interviews. What constitutes a useful interview (as distinct from a good interviewer) needs to be learned, and this learning was deemed to occur "on the job" (i.e. learning by doing and by watching others conduct interviews in their workplace). However, without quality supervision, monitoring of performance and feedback, the participants said they did not have a sense of what areas they needed to improve.

We can't monitor our interviews. That is a big stress, because we've got no idea of the standard of work being done (female detective sergeant).

Interestingly, the importance of supervision, training and feedback was not usually talked about in the context of "best-practice" interview guidelines (e.g. the use of open-ended questions). Rather, an emphasis was placed on the sufficiency of the "brief" of evidence (of which the pre-recorded interview was the main component) and whether the interview met the requirements of the law. Thus, concerns about lack of feedback tended to relate to those interviews that were more open to scrutiny from the court (e.g. recorded interviews) and legal professionals' rather than whether their questioning techniques were in accordance with "best-practice" interview guidelines *per se*.

I don't usually get to hear the child's evidence. At the end of the trial the solicitor or barrister closes the case and they move straight on to the next one. I don't usually get to hear the criticism out of a matter, nor do I get a critique of my interview. How can I improve if I'm not being criticised? (male detective senior constable).

Uncertainty about the interview quality seemed to manifest in the fear of being personally responsible for having a child's evidence, or part thereof, ruled inadmissible in court. This fear led some participants to avoid (where possible) conducting pre-recorded child statements. Further some participants who were in managerial positions were equally

worried about the lack of supervision offered and the potential implications of this lack of supervision on conviction rates.

There are some members who are terrified of doing pre-recorded interviews because they don't feel adequate enough. I know of members who avoid and do subtle things to get out of doing them. That's a big problem. That is our core work. It's not their fault though because they are not adequately trained (male, senior constable).

I'm in charge of them. It's my responsibility. If they're doing something wrong and there's criticism from the (Office of Public Prosecutions), I've got to rectify that ... That's why I need to critique them now because it might be 12 months before a case goes to trial. That staff member may have made the same mistake in 20 interviews during that 12-month period. That's why we need to pick them up early (male, detective sergeant).

Discussion

The main finding of this study is that the police officers' perceptions about what makes a good investigative interviewer of children differed from that of eyewitness memory experts. While the participants recognised (as experts do) the important role of investigative interviewers in the legal process, they placed little emphasis on the importance of an open-ended questioning style. Instead, they focused primarily on the interviewers' personal qualities, such as being relaxed, warm, easy going, sensitive and attentive to the needs of others. These characteristics were considered particularly important in establishing a relationship based on trust with the child, for communicating effectively with the child witness, and for eliciting disclosures about sensitive, embarrassing or traumatic experiences.

Experts in investigative interviewing also consider that warmth and a bond of mutual trust between the interviewer and the child is important. Indeed, supportiveness during an interview can decrease the detrimental impact of police authority on children's suggestibility and it can increase the willingness of victims to discuss their abuse (Carter *et al.*, 1996, Davies *et al.*, 2000, Goodman *et al.*, 1990, Moston and Engelberg, 1992). However, experts also contend that without open-ended questions, the impact of the interviewer's personal style is eliminated or markedly reduced (Powell *et al.*, 2005). Open-ended questioning (which is compatible with a witness-focused approach) facilitates good interviewer-child rapport because one of the central concerns of witnesses is to have their account heard and understood (Federal Law Enforcement Training Center, 1992, Westcott and Davies, 1996). If the interviewer directs his or her limited mental resources to formulating a few open-ended questions (as opposed to multiple specific questions), this allows the interviewer to listen more intently to the witness's responses (Powell *et al.*, 2005). If used in the pre-substantive (rapport-building phase), open-ended questions can reduce the witness' uncertainty about the interview process, thereby increasing the detail and accuracy of subsequent responses (Roberts *et al.*, 2004, Sternberg *et al.*, 1997).

The police officers' emphasis on personal qualities should not be taken to mean that they actually exhibit these personal attributions or that these characteristics are emphasised by superiors within the workplace. Police culture does not tend to place high value on the emotional orientation of officers (Woody, 2005) and police officers who work in the area of

child abuse investigation tend to report lower levels of victim empathy compared to other professionals (e.g. social workers and therapists, see Wright *et al.*, in press). Further, although the officers emphasised the value of personal qualities when working with victims, the client group was not often the primary motivation for entering the area of child abuse investigation. Therefore, it seems a little surprising that such high value was placed on personal qualities such as sensitivity and attentiveness to the needs of others, which is more compatible with a welfare-oriented, rather than law enforcement organisational culture (Garrett, 2004).

There are two possible reasons why the officers neglected to acknowledge the importance of an open-ended questioning style. First, it may be that these questions do not constitute an effective “yardstick” for evaluating their performance. Many of the officers had openly stated that they were unsure about whether they were performing well in investigative interviews. Further, we know from previous work (e.g. Berliner and Lieb, 2001; Bull and Milne, 2004) that even when police interviewers know what an open-ended question is, they have difficulty monitoring their adherence to these questions (this is probably due to the fact that forensic interviewing is such a cognitively challenging skill). Thus, without effective criteria for evaluating their performance, the interviewers may be forced to use some other criteria to measure their ability (e.g. the degree to which they feel, or are perceived by others, to be at ease working with children).

The second explanation for why the police officers did not acknowledge the importance of open-ended questions is that the use of such questions may not be adequately monitored or reinforced in the field. Lack of adequate supervision and monitoring of performance was a frequent concern of the officers in this study, which is consistent with other research involving interviews or surveys with child abuse investigators (Aarons *et al.*, 2004, Davies *et al.*, 1998, Guadagno *et al.*, in press, Wright *et al.*, in press). Assuming that the lack of feedback is linked to interviewer attitudes about the value of open-ended questions, these findings support the need for more effective collaboration and feedback from key stakeholders (e.g. legal professionals) and more attention to internal quality control evaluation.

Overall, the current paper makes a unique contribution to the literature by providing insight into police officers' beliefs about their role as investigative interviewers of children. Most of the prior work on the competency of investigative interviewers has merely depicted the inconsistencies between interviewers' performance with best-practice interview guidelines (see, Powell *et al.*, 2005, for a review). Specifically, this study has revealed that limitations in the competency of police officers in interviewing children are not merely a problem of ‘doing’ (i.e. learning to ask open-ended questions). Improving the interviewing practices of police officers is likely to require a change in the way that officers perceive themselves and their role within the system as well. We know from the large body of literature on human learning that an individual's mental framework and orientation towards a newly learned skill markedly influences the likelihood that the skill will be transferred to the workplace (Clarke, 2002; McGeoch, 1947). Learning to use open-ended questions is an effortful process. Thus, unless investigative interviewers genuinely believe in the value of these questions, they would be less likely to expend the resources required to acquire this essential skill (Ericsson *et al.*, 1993).

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