Investigative Interviewing Research Briefing Note December 2011

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The purpose of this briefing note is to disseminate the initial findings of new research relating to investigative interviewing. Recent research conducted by our team has been focused on two key questions: (i) is there a role for a systematic, non-leading, closed-question interview technique, and (ii) can a special set of 'grain-size' instructions elicit more information from witnesses. In this briefing note we summarise the results of our studies to date.

Why did we conduct this research?

For some types of information, open-question interview techniques fail to extract sufficient detail from witnesses and for this reason they are not always adhered to by police or other forensic investigators. Departures from open-question interviewing styles risk the use of (mis)leading closed questions which threaten witness accuracy and can, therefore, pose a serious risk to the integrity of an investigation. The first aim of the current research was to systematically test a non-leading closed-question technique to elicit the 'safe' reporting of extra details. We also manipulated the level of detail – or grain size (GS) – at which witness information was reported. The motivation for doing this was as follows: while witnesses are prepared to report fine grained information, they usually fail to report coarse grained information, perhaps because they assume (often incorrectly) that it may not be precise enough to be informative in an investigation.

What did we find?

Using a standard laboratory-based mock witness paradigm, we tested witness memory using a novel closed-question technique. This technique, called the Grain-size Procedure, required witnesses to respond to non-leading questions at two different levels of detail for each question – specific (fine-grain) and broad (coarse-grain) - and then select their preferred response. Unsurprisingly, participants in the grain-size conditions produced significantly more information than witnesses who simply responded to open-ended questions. The accuracy of the information provided by witnesses in the grain-size group was also high. Most notably, the information gain was particularly apparent for coarse grain information. Coarse grain information – which was rarely reported at all in open-question interview conditions - was not associated with a significant accuracy cost except at very low confidence levels.

These initial results reveal that witnesses can remember significantly more accurate information than they typically choose to report in response to open-question approaches. In particular, witnesses can access a good deal of accurate coarse grain information – but they do not report it spontaneously. Coarse grain information, such as the shade of a getaway car, a general description of clothing details, can be forensically useful – so why do witnesses not report it? There are a number of possibilities – witnesses may have expectations about the kind of information they need to supply during forensic interviews. For instance, they may believe that providing coarse grain information violates social communication norms and will not be useful for investigators. As a result, they choose to report only information that reaches a certain threshold of (perceived) informativeness or importance.

What did we do next?

Given these findings, in our follow-up studies, we examined whether it was possible to increase the reporting of forensically useful coarse grain information in open-question interviews through the use of special Grain Size Instructions. We devised and tested a special set of instructions which facilitate the reporting of coarse grain information in response to open questioning (as opposed to closed-questions). Mock witnesses who received these instructions reported the same number of fine grain details as witnesses in control open-question interview groups – but reported significantly more accurate coarse grain details.

Summary

The current studies provide interesting insights into how witnesses regulate their memory reports in laboratory settings. We have identified that, depending on the response options available, non-leading closed questions can be safely used to elicit information from witnesses that would not otherwise be reported. We have also identified a method of extracting additional coarse grain information from witnesses in the course of an open-question interview.

These innovative approaches are novel – and experimental. Although results to date have been promising, we do not endorse the use of the closed question Grain Size Procedure at this time. Non-leading closed questions may be a future component of a skilled interviewer's tool kit but more research is needed to address how these techniques and approaches to eyewitness memory might be further developed for use in applied investigative interviewing contexts.

If you have any comments regarding this Briefing Note, please contact Lorraine Hope (Lorraine.Hope@port.ac.uk). *This programme of research has been funded by the Economic and Social Research Council and the Australian Research Council.*