Table 3  Continued

- Relative success in:
  - personal relationships
  - work
  - Attachment to hobbies, interests, religion, etc.
  - Recent change in any relationship to the above attachments

**Emotional reactivity**
- History of violence toward others
- Impulsive behaviors
- Excessive rage or other uncontrolled, aggressive behavior

**Lifestyle/character**
- Typical coping patterns
- Perfectionism
- Self-destructive behaviors (such as self-mutilation, drinking/driving, etc.)
- Frequent crises, often those appearing self-created
- Victimization behaviors, e.g., bullied

**Access to care**
- History of help-seeking behavior
- Known barriers to healthcare (e.g., lack of insurance, no accessible caregiver)

**Other areas of inquiry**
- Occupational history
- Hobbies/interests
- Gambling history
- Degree of religiosity

\[\text{psychological autopsy significantly improves manner of death determinations and offers clues to understand better the state of mind of those who complete suicide.}\]

**See Also**

- Crime-scene Investigation and Examination: Death-scene Investigation, United States of America; Suspicious Deaths; Deliberate Self-Harm, Patterns; Expert Witness: Daubert and Beyond; Forensic Psychiatry and Forensic Psychology: Assessment; Suicide Predictors and Statistics; Medical Malpractice: Psychiatry

**Further Reading**


**Forensic Interviewing**

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**Introduction**

The principal determinant of whether a criminal case is solved is the completeness and accuracy of an eye-witness's account. Whether or not witnesses can provide complete and accurate reports is partially determined by factors not under the legal system's
control, such as the viewing conditions at the scene of the crime or the witness's memory and verbal skills. The focus here is on that part of the investigative process that the legal system can control, namely, how they interview witnesses.

**Scientific Research on Interviewing**

Prior to 1980 little scientific, experimental research had been conducted on the psychological processes underlying witness recollection. There were many demonstrations that witnesses misidentified innocent suspects or that witnesses incorrectly described the central elements of a crime (perpetrators, weapons, actions). However, little experimental research had been done to examine the causes of these errors, and more important, what can be done to improve witness recollection.

The two primary goals of a forensic interview with a cooperative witness are: (1) to elicit accurate recollections; and (2) to elicit extensive, detailed recollections. What are the psychological principles underlying accuracy and quantity of memory, and how can these principles be translated into effective interviewing techniques?

**Accuracy of Witness Recollection**

Although people may occasionally misperceive events, generally our perceptions of the external world are accurate. Therefore, if witnesses are encouraged to describe their perceptions naturally, and to volunteer only those recollections they are certain of, their testimony is likely to be accurate. Unfortunately, various factors inherent in forensic interviews conspire against such pure recollections. First, in response to open-ended questions (e.g., What did the robber look like?), witnesses, and especially young children, often provide short and incomplete answers. Second, witness narratives frequently wander off track into forensically irrelevant topics. In an effort to elicit more informative answers, interviewers ask many specific, closed-ended questions (e.g., How tall was the robber?). The drawback of asking closed-ended questions is that they elicit less accurate responses, as they entice witnesses to volunteer answers that they are not certain of. Forensic interviewers should therefore try to elicit information mainly through the use of open-ended questions. They should explicitly instruct witnesses not to guess, but rather to indicate, “I don’t know.” This is particularly important when interviewing young children, who might otherwise be motivated to provide answers, whether certain or not, simply to comply with their expected social role of answering questions. In reality, police interviewers rarely caution witnesses against guessing. If anything, just the opposite occurs when interviewers subtly reinforce or praise witnesses for volunteering answers (e.g., “You seem to remember a lot about the crime”) or when interviewers utter the innocent comment, “good,” after witnesses provide information. In their zeal to elicit complete, detailed responses, forensic interviewers may create a more serious problem of encouraging witnesses to fabricate incorrect memories.

Another potential threat to accuracy is that memories are sometimes constructed from knowledge sources other than the crime itself. That is, witnesses take in or encode information about a crime from a variety of sources, including conversations with other witnesses, the media, or even the interviewer himself/herself. Witnesses may then incorporate these other sources of information into their memories of the crime, and then later forget where they acquired this information or incorrectly remember the source of information (known as “source-monitoring” errors). Interviewers should therefore be careful not to make suggestive comments or to convey their personal beliefs about how the crime was committed.

Well-trained interviewers are unlikely flagrantly to express their personal beliefs to witnesses consciously; however, they may subtly convey their beliefs unconsciously. For instance, in attempting to verify their hunch about the crime, police interviewers may subtly suggest the anticipated answer in the form of a suggestive question: Was it a red shirt? Respondents are sensitive to such implicit suggestions — after all, the police officer is an authority figure and may have knowledge of what transpired during the crime. This inferred belief may then be incorporated into the witness’s later memory of the crime.

Of greater practical concern than police interviewers distorting witness recollections is the potential influence of nonpolice interviewers, who may have vested interests in witness recollections being slanted one way or another. For instance, defense attorneys are more successful when prosecution witnesses express doubt or remember the crime in a way that makes the defendant appear not culpable. Just the opposite, prosecutors benefit when witnesses express their memories confidently and remember the crime in a way that makes the defendant more palpably culpable. Clinical psychologists may have a completely different bias. Their main concern is the therapeutic value of the interview, and so they may be more interested in their client’s “remembering” an event in a way that leads to a favorable therapeutic outcome, irrespective of its historical accuracy. Certainly, one is not charging any profession with
intentionally distorting memories through poor interviewing practices. Nevertheless the potential exists, and in fact, guided distortions of the truth are not rarities among forensic interviews.

**Amount of Witness Recollection**

Ideally, witness recollection will not only be accurate, but will also contain extensive information. Fortunately, recent theoretical advances in social and cognitive psychology have given rise to innovative interviewing techniques to increase the amount of information that witnesses recall. The interview process can be divided into three psychological processes: (1) social dynamics; (2) cognition; and (3) communication. For the interview to proceed effectively:

1. Both the witness and the interviewer must establish the proper social dynamics, with each person knowing and playing his or her role in the exchange of ideas.
2. The thought processes of both the witness and the interviewer must be efficient so that the witness can remember the details of the event and the interviewer can ask questions properly and keep track of the witness’s description.
3. Both the witness and the interviewer must communicate their thoughts to each other. Witnesses must communicate their memories of the crime to the interviewer, and interviewers must communicate their investigative needs to the witness.

A thumbnail sketch of some of the basic concepts is presented here.

**Social dynamics** Police interview witnesses because they possess some information about the crime event that police do not know. In conversations between a curious person (police) and an expert (witness), the expert normally does most of the talking, while the curious person takes a more passive role, absorbing the expert’s knowledge. In many police interviews, however, this norm is violated, with the police officer playing the dominant role and relegating the witness to a passive role. As a result of having been forced into this passive role, witnesses often generate relatively little information and respond with only brief answers—even though they possess extensive, relevant information. To inculcate the proper social dynamics, the police interviewer should: (1) state explicitly to the witness what are the expected social roles; (2) ask primarily open-ended questions; and (3) not interrupt witnesses before they have completed their answers. Unfortunately, recent studies examining police interviews with victims and witnesses show that interviewers violate all three of these recommendations. They rarely explain the proper social roles; they ask very few open-ended questions (almost all of their questions are closed-ended); and they frequently interrupt witnesses in the middle of their answers.

Because of the emotional and personal nature of many forensic investigations, interviewers should take time to develop a personal rapport with the witness, and especially when interviewing a victim. Police interviewers sometimes fail to develop this basic personal contact effectively, and as a consequence, victims do not feel comfortable divulging all of the details of emotionally charged and personal experiences.

Establishing a personal connection with the respondents is also important when interviewing suspects. Recent studies have shown that suspects are more likely to volunteer relevant information when they are treated respectfully, in a humane fashion, than when they are subjugated by a dominant interviewer who creates an adversarial relationship. This type of confrontational style, however, seems to be the most common approach to interviewing suspects.

**Cognition** The mental tasks of both the witness and the interviewer are extremely challenging in a criminal interview. Witnesses are asked to remember complex events in great detail. Interviewers must keep track of and notate witnesses’ descriptions, which are often disorganized, and formulate insightful questions instantaneously. Fortunately, considerable knowledge about witnesses’ and interviewers’ mental processes has been amassed by cognitive psychologists and can be applied to the task. Some of the major principles are as follows:

1. **Context reinstatement.** People’s memories for earlier events can be enhanced by putting them back into the same physical, emotional, or mental context as when they experienced the original event. Instructing witnesses at the time of the interview to think about their thoughts or the external environment at the time of the crime should therefore facilitate memory for the crime. The tactic of returning to the scene of the crime works because of context reinstatement.

2. **Limited mental resources.** People have only a limited amount of mental resources to process information. Any distracting signals (e.g., noises in the environment, or even interviewers asking questions) may therefore deflect a witness’s mental resources away from remembering the crime. Interviewers should attempt to maintain a quiet environment, and to ask as few questions
as possible. (Despite the beliefs of many investigators, the most successful interviewers are those open-ended, uninterrupted narrative of the entire crime event; (3) follow up with more focused mes-

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the UK and found similar results. That is, police officers trained to use the cognitive interview elicited considerably more information from victims and witnesses than equally experienced police conducting conventional police interviews. We cannot know in real crimes whether witness recollections are accurate, because we do not know for certain what transpired in the crime. (That is one of the major advantages of conducting laboratory research.) The best estimate of recollection accuracy (based on corroborating testimony from other witnesses) suggests that the cognitive interview yields about the same or slightly more accurate responses than do conventional police interviews. We, therefore, have good reason to believe that the recommended techniques work to elicit considerably more extensive, and slightly more accurate, witness testimony.

There are no apparent costs of using the recommended techniques in terms of the quality and amount of information elicited. There may, however, be a practical cost. Specifically, more time is required to implement these procedures than to conduct a traditional police interview (using many specific, closed-ended questions). British police have commented that they often do not have adequate time to implement all of the component techniques. This is particularly true for the first police officer to respond after the crime. To remedy this situation, current research is being conducted: (1) to determine which of the techniques is most efficient; and (2) to develop a shorter version of the procedure.

**Training Interviewers**

How effectively police investigators learn to use proper interviewing techniques depends on the quality of the training they receive. Within the laboratory, some researchers have had remarkably greater success than others in training interviewers. The keys to training are to: (1) use a building-blocks approach, where the core techniques (e.g., asking open-ended questions) are taught first, and more refined techniques added later; (2) schedule the training over an extended period of time, so that learners are not overwhelmed with having to learn many techniques all at once; (3) provide extensive practice opportunities in controlled environments (e.g., role-playing exercises); and (4) provide constructive feedback on the interviewers’ performance.

Although scientifically based advances in interviewing have been available for the past 20 or 30 years, they have only recently been incorporated systematically into police training and only in a few countries around the world. The most progressive training programs are to be found in Europe (UK, Sweden, Norway, Germany, the Netherlands) and Australia. Progress has been much slower in North America, although a recent publication by the US Department of Justice Technical Working Group for Eyewitness Evidence may speed up the learning process.

**Interviewing Children**

With an increased awareness of child abuse, many legal investigators and research psychologists have become more interested in the skill of interviewing children. Much of the research was motivated by the highly publicized cases of the 1980s in which preschoolers falsely accused their day-care teachers of having sexually abused children. Many of the claims were originally taken at face value. Later investigations, however, found that some of these allegations were false. Of greater concern is that these false allegations may have been promoted by poor interviewing techniques. Some of the questionable interviewing techniques included promising children rewards for making specific statements, informing children about other witnesses’ statements, and asking children to speculate about events in question. Other problematic interviewing techniques used in these and other investigations include investigators conveying their preinterview biases to the children, and asking the same questions repeatedly, even after the child has answered the question. Finally, there is a common error of asking children very specific closed-ended suggestive questions. Many of these questioning procedures are problematic when interviewing adults. They are even more problematic when interviewing children, and especially young children, whose testimony is even more malleable. In light of this, more agencies throughout the world have been recording and monitoring child interviews and providing more specialized training for investigators who conduct child interviews.

When interviewed properly, children of all ages can provide useful and accurate information. Based on the extensive research done with child witnesses, many researchers and child protection agencies recommend the following interviewing tactics: (1) developing extensive rapport at the beginning of the interview; (2) asking open-ended questions; (3) adapting the language and questioning style for different age groups; (4) avoiding suggestive questions; and (5) avoiding complex questions. A particularly sensitive area of child interviewing for which guidelines have been developed is how to introduce the topic of the investigation (e.g., alleged
most researchers agree that, if an interviewer does use children to fabricate sexual events. There is not a help overcome these limitations. If the dolls are used children's limited vocabulary and knowledge about sexual activities and body parts. Some authorities have suggested using anatomically correct dolls to help overcome these limitations. If the dolls are used suggestively, however, that may encourage young children to fabricate sexual events. There is not a strong consensus on the use of these dolls, although most researchers agree that, if an interviewer does use these dolls, the interviewer must first receive a narrative statement on the event in question, i.e., anatomically correct dolls should be used only to clarify parts of a witness' statement made previously. Second, the interviewer must exercise extreme caution to avoid any hint of suggestion.

**Exotic Interviewing Techniques: Hypnosis**

Given the difficulty of eliciting extensive, detailed recollections from witnesses when using traditional interviewing methods, some have turned to exotic techniques, such as hypnosis, to assist witness memory. Although, periodically, one hears about breakthroughs in police investigations following a hypnotic witness interview, the research is not nearly so sanguine about the value of hypnosis. First, many people cannot be hypnotized, and even among people who can be hypnotized, many cannot be hypnotized to a deep level. Second, the research on hypnosis shows that it does not work reliably. As many laboratory studies show that it does not enhance memory as studies show that it does enhance memory. Third, and of greater concern, there are important costs associated with hypnotically refreshed memory. Specifically, under laboratory testing, hypnotized witnesses: (1) produce more fabricated recollections than those who are not hypnotized; (2) are more influenced by interviewers' misleading comments and questions than are nonhypnotized witnesses; and (3) are more confident in the accuracy of their recollections than are nonhypnotized witnesses – even when their recollections are false. As a result of these potential costs, hypnosis is often proscribed as an interviewing procedure in many jurisdictions, although note that several countries do permit hypnotically refreshed witness recollections.

**Detecting Deception**

When people report about criminal events, there is sometimes the concern that they may be deceptive. Interviewers therefore attempt to distinguish between truthful and false witnesses. Among many different qualitative approaches, the only approach to assess witness credibility that has been tested empirically is the so-called Criteria Based Content Analyses (CBCA), which is the core component of an elaborate credibility assessment system, Statement Validity Assessment (SVA). This approach is based on Undeutsch's hypothesis that true and false statements differ in quality and quantity and can therefore be distinguished. The SVA consists of three parts: (1) a structured witness interview; (2) an evaluation of the witness's statement according to CBCA criteria; and (3) a validity checklist incorporating information from the interview and the CBCA results. CBCA consists of 18 criteria, which are assumed to be present more often in accounts of true than false events. Examples of these criteria are whether the witness's statement was rich in details, whether it contained verbatim speech, and whether the witness questioned his or her own memory. Empirical research has found mixed results on the usefulness of the criteria, and moderating variables have yet to be fully explored. Although SVA has been recommended as the most useful tool in credibility assessment in some European legal settings, some researchers have expressed doubts concerning the validity of CBCA.

There is broad agreement that the usefulness of the CBCA criteria depends heavily on the way the witness's statement is elicited, and so SVA provides guidelines for conducting the interview. The CBCA criteria distinguish more effectively between true and false witness accounts when interviewers ask open-ended questions (to elicit more narrative responses) and refrain from using techniques to alter the witness's statement (e.g., suggestive questions).

**Interviewing Suspects**

Following several recent cases in which high-profile defendants were released from custody because they provided false or coerced confessions, the UK reviewed its policies of interrogating suspects. Current practice has much more in common with interviewing cooperative witnesses, i.e., developing rapport and treating suspects in a humane fashion in an attempt to elicit voluntary information. Police practices in the USA are more traditional, with more psychological ploys to elicit confessions and fewer legal restraints against deceiving suspects. Although there is no universally accepted technique of interrogating suspects, many American police who receive interrogation training are encouraged to minimize the suspect's perceived consequences of confessing.
The interrogator may offer justifications or face-saving excuses for having committed the offense (e.g., she tempted you by being dressed so provocatively) or may suggest that the suspect did not realize the seriousness of the offense, or that the interrogator him/herself might have done the same thing in the situation. There has been little formal research to examine whether this minimization strategy accomplishes its goal, namely, to encourage guilty suspects to confess without promoting false confessions from innocent suspects. Unfortunately, the news from recent laboratory studies is discouraging, as the minimization strategy appears to promote false confessions along with true confessions. In one such study, volunteer participants were more likely to “confess” to cheating in an experiment (providing answers to another, confederate participant) when the interviewer used the minimization strategy than when the interviewer did not use the strategy. Admittedly, generalizing laboratory results to real-world interrogations is tenuous, because laboratory “crimes” and the consequences of laboratory crimes cannot be as severe as those occurring in the real world. That is, we cannot charge research volunteers with having committed serious legal infractions and threaten to detain them if they do not cooperate. Nevertheless, there are grounds for concern. Furthermore, we have good reason to believe that at least some real-world confessions were probably coerced by improper police interrogation practices. Certainly this deserves more research.

Interviewing Techniques for Other Investigative Tasks

Although the focus here has been on police interviews of cooperative witnesses, there are many other forensic investigations that require eliciting information from people, e.g., internal affairs investigations, debriefing police (or military) after a critical event, war crimes investigations. On the surface, these tasks appear to be very different from interviews with cooperative witnesses. However, many of the described techniques should be equally effective with these tasks, and especially when there is a heavy component of memory and communication, as with debriefing police officers following a criminal investigation.

See Also

Identification: Facial; Injuries and Deaths During Police Operations: Shootings During Police Stops and Arrests; Special Weapons and Training Teams; Recovered Memory: War Crimes: Pathological Investigation

Further Reading

Introduction

The empirical study of suicide and suicidal behaviors provides the necessary data sets for the understanding of these multifaceted and complex phenomena. The limitations of these statistics and methods of data collection are reviewed first and then both an international and American snapshot of suicide, with particular reference to perpetuating and predisposing risk factors, are given. Finally the perspective toward understanding methods of suicide and how understanding both methods and risk leads to current best practice in suicide prevention are described.

Limitations

Accurate data are essential for the understanding of suicidal phenomena, efforts to assess and treat those at risk for suicide and suicidal behaviors, and to develop public health prevention programs.

There are several limitations and problems inherent in collecting data on suicide. Suicide is a low base-rate event. In the USA it accounts for 30,000 deaths annually, a rate of 10–11/100,000. Thus, large-scale prospective studies of those at risk are rare given the need to follow inordinately large samples over time. Moreover, retrospective studies must rely on archival documents and third-party data sources, as the object of study is unavailable for interview.

The primary archival document, of course, is the death certificate, but this provides little more than basic demographic information about the decedent. Moreover, coroners, particularly in rural communities and when the death involves a child or a member of a prominent family, may conceal the true manner of death in an effort to spare the family from the stigma associated with suicide or to protect the reputation or memory of the deceased. There is no reliable estimate of how much underreporting of suicides occurs, but best estimates suggest it is in the range of 15–20%. Moreover, underreporting – if it is indeed more common in certain types of suicides, for example, in minority groups – may distort the demographic picture of suicide.

In addition, data sets in the USA have not been linked. Thus, it may be learnt from a study of death certificates that a large proportion of decedents died by a firearm, but specifics such as the type of firearm, its storage, purchase, and whether it was used as a murder weapon immediately before the suicide are not described on the death certificate. Co-occurring events such as homicide–suicides can only be determined by linking police investigation reports to each individual death certificate. This is only now being initiated on a large scale, but on a pilot basis, in the USA through the National Violent Death Reporting System.

One consequence of the difficulties in collecting data on completed suicides is that the overwhelming majority of understanding of suicide originates from studies of nonfatal attempters. After all, these individuals survive their attempt to die by suicide and remain available for interview. However, here also, significant problems are encountered in that only a fraction of nonfatal suicide attempters are comparable in their character to suicide completers. An individual may be a nonfatal suicide attempter because of: (1) miscalculation of the number of pills needed to accomplish death; (2) external intervention or thwarted attempt; or (3) feigning suicide to have interpersonal influence over another person, e.g., to induce guilt. Rarely do studies differentiate or report samples of attempters by level of lethality (medical–biological dangerousness) inherent in the method used and/or circumstances of a nonfatal attempt.

Nomenclature Issues

Suicide and suicide behaviors reflect a range and variety of behaviors that are distinct from one another, yet overlap. Moreover, there are a number of self-harm behaviors that are not suicidal in intent, yet are self-destructive. For example, self-mutilators cut and/or burn themselves, but are not suicidal. Their intent is to feel pain or see blood. Their actions relieve tension or a dissociative state, or replace feelings of emptiness; the actor figuratively proclaims: “I bleed, therefore I am!” Rather than wanting to be dead, they feel more alive through these behaviors. At the same time, self-mutilators are at heightened risk for suicide. Suicidology’s lack of a standardized nomenclature is referred to as a “tower of Babel.”

Data Sources

As noted above, death certificates serve as the primary data source for the study of suicide. In the USA, these are sent to a state’s vital statistics office and, ultimately, to the National Center for Health Statistics, which publishes mortality data for the country. The epidemiology of a country’s suicide mortality is thus derived from the quality and limitations of death certificates.