Interviewing Victims and Witnesses of Crime

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The problem

Research on the investigative process has emphasized that the completeness and accuracy of eyewitness accounts are important factors in whether or not the cases are solved. Eyewitness reports of crimes, however, are known to be incomplete, sometimes unreliable, and often at least partially incorrect.

Although the quality of a victim's or witness' report is important to effective investigation, police investigators often have minimal guidance in developing interview techniques that facilitate retrieving memories of a criminal event. The typical police investigator must rely on the limited interview techniques acquired during the initial recruit training, on-the-job training, and intuition. The purpose of this research has been to identify and develop techniques that police investigators can use to enhance the completeness and accuracy of eyewitness reports.

The volume of basic research studies on memory recall is immense. Most of this work, however, has little applicability to the victim or eyewitness situation because it was designed to help students learn from books and lectures. Most (but not all) victims and eyewitnesses, however, are so occupied with the event that they do not have time to try to learn or memorize details about a suspect at the time of the crime.

In the typical crime scenario, the events unfold rapidly under emotionally charged conditions. As a consequence, consciously controlled learning strategies are unlikely to be used. In practice, eyewitness memory can be enhanced only by developing techniques that improve the retrieval or search phase of memory.

The cognitive interview

The research summarized in this Research in Brief was designed to devise interview methods based on current memory theory to enhance the completeness and accuracy of eyewitness reports, and to test these methods under controlled, yet realistic, circum-

Avoid the legal concerns that surround the use of another interviewing technique, hypnosis.

The Institute is currently sponsoring research to test the cognitive interview approach in actual, day-to-day police investigations. We expect the results will help refine the techniques outlined in this Research in Brief. In the meantime, the Brief describes the procedures so police investigators and training staffs can begin to use this new tool to improve the quality of information provided by eyewitnesses to crime.

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Primary techniques of the cognitive interview

The cognitive interview consists of four major fields for gathering memory plus several specific techniques. The results of the four general techniques below are explained as they are presented in their own words. The investigator then follows up on the narrative report with questions intended to enhance the completeness of the report.

1. Reconstruc the circumstances: In this method, the investigator elicits the subject's memory for the incident in general. This technique is designed to recall the incident in its entirety. It is a useful technique for recalling the incident, but it does not involve the specific details of the incident. Instead, it provides an overview of the incident.

2. Ask the victim or witness to reconstruct the incident in general. This technique is designed to recall the incident in its entirety. It is a useful technique for recalling the incident, but it does not involve the specific details of the incident. Instead, it provides an overview of the incident.

3. Select the events in different order: The instruction may be: "It is natural to go through the incident from beginning to end. However, you also need to try to follow the order in which the incident occurred from beginning to end."

4. Change perspectives: In this method, the investigator tries to recall the incident from different perspectives. If the incident is not clear, the investigator may choose to use the perspective of people who were present during the incident. If the incident is not clear, the investigator may choose to use the perspective of people who were present during the incident. If the incident is not clear, the investigator may choose to use the perspective of people who were present during the incident.

Additional techniques

In addition to the four general methods, the cognitive interview also uses a number of specific techniques to help the investigator elicit specific items of information. These techniques are designed to enhance the memory of the victim or witness.

Enforcement of the legal perspective is not necessary, as the cognitive interview can be conducted without legal intervention. The cognitive interview is a workable memory-enhancement technique that is both effective and efficient. It can be applied to enhance the memory of victims and eyewitnesses to violent crimes.

In the previous tests, the memory retrieval techniques were developed and evaluated primarily in student samples. To examine the effectiveness of the cognitive interview in a nonstudent population, 51 volunteers were used. An average age of 32 was used for this experiment. The methodology was the same as in the first experiment, except that hypnosis was not studied.

The results, summarized in table 3, provided a second replication of the memory-enhancement technique with the cognitive interview. As in the previous experiment, the cognitive interview elicited significantly more correct information than the standard police interview. In this experiment, the subject population was more representative of those who are likely to be victims of crimes or eyewitnesses. The methodology was the same as in the first experiment, except that hypnosis was not studied.

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Although the cognitive and hypnosis procedures were equally effective, the cognitive interview can be used with a variety of techniques to enhance the memory of victims and eyewitnesses. The cognitive interview is a workable memory-enhancement technique that is both effective and efficient. It can be applied to enhance the memory of victims and eyewitnesses to violent crimes.

The cognitive interview has been reviewed by trial lawyers, but it has not been shown to be too successful. However, it appears to avoid the legal problems surrounding the use of forensic hypnosis. Since 1979, appellate courts in many jurisdictions have refused to admit hypnosis or to require its use in certain cases. However, in some cases, the negatives of misleading questions should be investigated before using them.

A fifth experiment was conducted to determine whether or not the methods used in the cognitive interview could be used to enhance the memory of victims and eyewitnesses. The results showed that the cognitive interview is a workable memory-enhancement technique that is both effective and efficient. It can be applied to enhance the memory of victims and eyewitnesses to violent crimes.
of the four general retrieval techniques of the cognitive interview; some subjects were instructed in all four methods (the full cognitive interview); others were instructed simply to try very hard to remember.

The pattern of results was clear. Witnesses who were instructed in any one of the four general retrieval techniques were able to recall more correct information than witnesses who were not instructed in any technique. But none of the four methods alone was as effective as the full cognitive interview.

Thus, each technique in the procedure is useful. Although one would want to make the cognitive interview as brief as possible, the technique as it presently exists is efficient. The number of incorrectly generated bits of information did not differ across the conditions in this experiment. Therefore, this study provided the fourth replication of the success of the cognitive interview.

Conclusions

In five experiments, the cognitive interview was found to increase the amount of correct information elicited from eyewitnesses without increasing the proportion of incorrect information generated. The interview methods were successful with lesser educated witnesses, nonstudents, as well as with student witnesses, and for eliciting memories of real-life incidents as well as of films of violent crime scenarios.

From our results, it appears that the cognitive interview techniques could be incorporated into the interviews of law enforcement investigators with a minimum of additional training. Eyewitnesses can learn the methods quickly, thus saving valuable time for investigators, who often have demanding caseloads. Police investigators who participated in the experiments, and others who have learned of the cognitive interview, already have begun to incorporate the memory jogging techniques into their own interview procedures.

The logical and important conclusion of this work will be the implementation and evaluation of the cognitive interview in the field. Although the present results are encouraging, the skills of the interviewer may be a major variable in the success of the technique. Field research now in progress sponsored by the National Institute of Justice should provide important and necessary insights for effective training and use of the cognitive interview.

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References
