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The Need for Rapport in Police Interviews

by Roger Collins, Robyn Lincoln and Mark Frank

POLICE INTERVIEWS
Police interviews try to obtain a narrative of what was observed by witnesses, victims or suspects. Yet there is considerable debate about the most appropriate interview style, the best strategies to use, and the characteristics of interviewers or interviewees that yield the most useful information. Police interviews are integral to criminal investigations where accuracy and completeness are essential if a case is to be solved. They also have evidential ramifications that affect subsequent forensic and trial processes (Fisher et al, 1994; Py et al, 1997; McMahon, 2000; Gudjonsson, 1992).

In addition to the formal interview setting, police engage in “purposive conversations” on a daily basis, which are said to comprise up to 80 percent of their duties (Newberry & Stubbs, 1997). Yet, law enforcement personnel often do not receive adequate training in effective interviewing practices (Wrightsman et al, 1994; Lauchland & Le Brun, 1996). In many cases, there is little formal instruction, with officers learning their interview skills on the job, and this may foster the use of poor methods or result in the loss of potentially valuable information. This limited interview training still occurs for most general duties officers in Australia despite the wealth of research on interview techniques.

RESEARCH ON INTERVIEWING
The research literature suggests ways of maximising accuracy and completeness in the interview process. Some of the variables identified include the status or approach of the interviewer, the conditions of the recall environment, and the type and wording of the questions asked. Generally, a free recall is said to be the most accurate but least complete method; a question-and-answer narrative is less accurate but more complete; and specific multiple-choice questions are the least accurate but the most complete (Loftus, 1996).

Most research aimed at improving recall, especially for cooperative witnesses, has compared the cognitive approach with standard interview techniques, or compared revised versions of the cognitive interview strategy with its earlier forms (Mello & Fisher, 1996; Fisher et al, 1994). The cognitive technique consists of specific memory-jogging methods (Fisher & McCauley, 1995; McMahon, 2000). By comparison, the standard police interview technique, involves a narrative report of what happened, followed by a question-and-answer format. Police investigators tend to use this free recall type interview, often interrupted by direct questions. The consequences are that the interviewer can influence the recall, while the witness receives insufficient assistance in memory retrieval (Py et al, 1997).
Other research has focused on the influence of interpersonal variables. For example, subjects interviewed by higher status individuals (such as a senior police officer in uniform), produce longer recall reports although there is not necessarily an increase in accuracy and completeness (Loftus, 1996). More importantly, research shows that the interviewing officer’s attitude at the first point of contact with a victim or witness is crucial to the information-gathering process, the likely success of the investigation, and generally to more effective law enforcement through intelligence-gathering (Geiselman & Fisher, 1989; Grabosky, 1992).

THE NEED FOR RAPPORT
The necessity for establishing rapport to facilitate a “productive interpersonal climate” has been well-established. It is based on the assumption that if parties in an interview “get along”, then the interview will be more “successful”, because an interviewee is more likely to cooperate with someone with whom they feel comfortable. Yet even though rapport is considered a vital component in successful interviews, it is not clear what constitutes rapport and the literature lacks suggestions about how to guarantee it (Minichiello et al, 1990; Olsen & Wells, 1991; Zulawski & Wicklander, 1993).

Rapport nevertheless can be defined as a “harmonious, empathetic, or sympathetic relation or connection to another self” (Newberry & Stubbs, 1997: 14). A successful interview, governed by rapport, is likened to an informal conversation, with the interviewer listening and responding in a curious manner. Rapport-building establishes harmony in the interview, leads to free discussion and creates a willingness in the mind of the interviewee (Keats, 1993).

Although there are few studies that specifically address rapport, those that do have produced mixed results. One US study concerned the deaths of 51 law enforcement officers killed in the line of duty. In these cases it was essential that investigators established rapport to facilitate a positive mood in the offenders who had nothing to gain by being cooperative. This study was able to demonstrate that the development of rapport — in combination with specific interview techniques — resulted in more detailed information being obtained (Pinizzotto & Davis, 1996; Geiselman et al, 1998).

Another study examined whether an interviewer who is “warm and accepting” will have a positive effect on the interviewee, resulting in more complete and accurate recall than one who questions or challenges (see Loftus, 1996). However, this study found that even though the subjects felt more positive about the interview, it did not translate to increased completeness or accuracy of their recall. Similarly, some studies have tested familiarity as a measure of rapport, where for example, children are interviewed by a parent versus an unfamiliar adult. Again the results were not encouraging because the unfamiliar interviewers elicited more accurate information than the parent interviewers (Ricci et al, 1996).

While rapport is generally accepted as a critical element in interpersonal communication, it is more easily established with some people than others. For example, those from a similar background, profession or interest can have a natural rapport resulting from a familiarity with that person. This is where the status (perceived or otherwise) of the interviewer may have an effect. However, there are also verbal and non-verbal behaviours, adjustments to the interview environment and other factors that are recommended for the establishment of rapport.
OUR STUDY OF RAPPORT

Our recent study tested differences across three interviewer-attitude conditions — rapport, neutral and abrupt — that were developed from the initial contact and maintained throughout the formal interview phase. Specific scripts were devised for each of the three conditions by varying voice, dialogue, body language, name usage, as well as the placement of furniture and the use of props. For example, in the rapport mode, a hardcover diary was placed on the floor, whereas during the abrupt and neutral modes, it was dropped noisily onto the table or used as a barrier between the interviewer and the participant. In the rapport mode the interviewer spoke with a gentle tone, referred to the participant by name and adopted a more relaxed body posture.

The 42 student volunteers were randomly assigned to the rapport, neutral or abrupt conditions. There were 14 males and 28 females and their average age was 26 years. The interviews took place in a clinical interview room where all features of the physical setting remained the same. Participants were shown a brief video where a man suddenly dives into a burning motor vehicle in a field. There are agitated comments from off-screen bystanders and a fire truck arrives. The video is visually uncluttered but has strong emotional content. After viewing the videotape, participants were asked to produce a written narrative of what they had seen. They were then given a structured questionnaire designed to prompt their recall. Finally, they were asked to comment on the interviewer’s attitude as a check on the success or otherwise of rapport-building.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measure</th>
<th>Rapport</th>
<th>Condition</th>
<th>Abrupt</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Correct bits of information</td>
<td>29.43</td>
<td>18.64</td>
<td>18.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incorrect bits of information</td>
<td>2.21</td>
<td>1.93</td>
<td>2.21</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: n = 14 per condition; means with different superscripts within a row differ by LSD test at p < .01

The participants’ appraisals about the attitude of the interviewer were cross-checked by two coders who reached 93% agreement that indeed the experimental conditions were met, that is, in the rapport mode the coders rated the majority of subjects’ appraisals as demonstrating that the interviewer did indeed achieve rapport. Of most importance is that rapport differed significantly from the other two conditions, yet neutral and abrupt did not differ from each other in the appraisals of the interviewees.

There were potentially 96 correct pieces of information contained in the video. Statistical analyses showed that participants in the rapport condition recalled more of these than participants in the neutral or the abrupt conditions. With respect to incorrect information elicited in the interview, we found no significant differences across the three groups. Similarly on the questionnaire (ie when interviewees were
prompted) no significant differences across the three groups were found in terms of either the amount of correct or incorrect information recalled.

However, the tests showed that the rapport condition generated significantly less incorrect bits of information than the abrupt condition, and that the neutral condition did not differ from rapport or abrupt. Taken across both the free recall and the questionnaire, 91% of the information provided in the rapport condition was accurate, compared to 86 and 84% for the neutral and abrupt. Analysis showed a significant net accuracy for rapport compared to the other two conditions, and follow-up tests showed no difference between neutral and abrupt conditions.

**Table 2**
The number of correct and incorrect bits of information recalled via the cued recall questionnaire, by interviewer condition

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measure</th>
<th>Rapport</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Abrupt</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Correct bits of information</td>
<td>20.14</td>
<td>18.79</td>
<td>18.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incorrect bits of information</td>
<td>2.50</td>
<td>2.93</td>
<td>3.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Novel correct bits of information</td>
<td>4.79&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>8.64&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>9.00&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Novel incorrect bits of information</td>
<td>1.29&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>2.40&lt;sup&gt;ab&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>3.00&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note**: n = 14 per condition; means with different superscripts within a row differ by LSD test at p < .05

It was clear that participants in the rapport condition provided more information and better quality information compared to the other two conditions. This did not seem to be a function of the sex or age of the participants nor the time spent talking or words used. However, we did find that participants in the rapport condition spent significantly more time with the interviewer (average of 28 mins) compared to either the neutral or abrupt conditions (averages of 16 and 15 mins). Also, the participants used more words in the rapport condition (average of 224), compared to either the neutral or abrupt conditions (averages of 112 and 81).

**CONCLUSIONS**
The ramifications of this study are that the interviewer who adopts a rapport-building approach with an interviewee creates the potential to substantially increase correct responses without increasing incorrect information. The rapport participants will stay with the interviewer longer, and will more thoroughly search their memories for correct information to assist the interviewer.

This notion is further supported when we examined what participants said about the interview. In the rapport condition, nine participants specifically mentioned the fact that the interviewer’s “friendly and supportive” attitude made them “try harder” in the interview. By contrast, nine participants mentioned that they were “reluctant to assist” because of the interviewer’s negative attitude in the neutral and abrupt modes.

These results suggest that the interviewer’s attitude can seriously affect the quality and quantity of information provided. In essence, a lack of rapport has the potential to
turn a cooperative witness into an uncooperative one — not in all cases but in at least one-third of participants in this research project who were subject to the neutral or abrupt interviewer attitude. However, it is uncertain what effect rapport-building would have on suspect interviews, compared to the volunteer witness interview situation examined here.

The results also suggest, with respect to trying to define rapport, that a number of participants in this research project thought that the neutral condition was “rude” or “abrupt”. This shows that for some people, even when an interviewer acts disinterested this is interpreted in a negative way by the interviewee, which in turn is likely to affect the outcome of the interview.

Rapport-building can be criticised because it takes longer to develop, and clearly in our study the subjects in the rapport condition stayed longer in the interview. But what is important to any investigation is maximising the amount of correct information, while minimising the amount of incorrect information. Our results clearly show only an increase in correct information, and no corresponding increase of inaccuracies when rapport is established. Therefore differences in the amount of time it took to produce this correct information should not be a significant factor in any competent investigation.

Finally, it should be pointed out that even in the rapport mode our participants still only provided about one-third of the available correct information, which lends weight to the notion that eyewitness reports are always incomplete. However, because this was an artificial eyewitness situation, it is difficult to tell how these results would differ from real-life eyewitness cases, where witnesses see, hear, smell, taste and just simply experience in more detail all the information that occurs.

Contemporary law enforcement administrators seeking effective interviewing techniques should consider this rapport aspect of interpersonal communication in their recruit interview training. As noted earlier, police training in interviewing does seem limited especially when measured against the importance of intelligence-gathering and the amount of time investigators devote to “purposive conversations”. It seems that rapport-building is a simple yet cost-effective method of increasing accurate information for investigators in their search for evidence.

**AUTHOR NOTE**

Four-day training courses in Analytic Interviewing have been held at Bond University for the past four years with attendance by state and federal police, insurance and arson investigators, as well as those from other crime agencies. Another two such courses will be held in August 2003 on the Gold Coast. This interviewing technique, developed by law enforcement and academic psychologists in the USA incorporates rapport-building as an essential first step.


**ABOUT THE AUTHORS**

Roger Collins served with the Queensland Police Service for 28 years, including three with the Criminal Justice Commission and 18 months with the Australian Federal Police. He also served as Officer in Charge of Police Establishments prior to retiring as Detective Senior Sergeant. Roger graduated with a Masters degree in criminology.
in 1998 and it was at this time that he conducted the initial research on the effects of rapport on police interviewing. He is currently Director of Public Safety and Security at Bond University.

Robyn Lincoln is Assistant Professor and Coordinator of Criminology at Bond University where she teaches in the Australian Criminal Justice System, Crime and Deviance, Forensic Victimology and Criminal Profiling. She has previously taught and researched at University of Queensland, QUT and Griffith University in criminology and sociology. Robyn has published articles and chapters on a wide range of areas including criminal profiling, crime prevention, capital punishment and indigenous justice issues. Her most recent co-authored book, *Justice in the Deep North*, is an anatomy of crime and justice in Queensland since Federation.

Mark Frank is Associate Professor in Communications at Rutgers The State University, New Jersey, USA. He received his PhD from Cornell University and continued postdoctoral work at the University of California at San Francisco Medical School with Dr Paul Ekman. He also spent some years at the University of New South Wales. Dr Frank’s research areas are in facial expressions and interpersonal deception. He uses these findings to consult and train various law enforcement groups including the Los Angeles County Sheriff’s Department, the New Jersey State Police, the US Treasury Department, Bureau of Alcohol Tobacco and Firearms, Scotland Yard and the Nottingham Constabulary in the UK, the National Police Research Unit and the Victorian Police in Australia. He has also trained judges from various jurisdictions including the US Federal Judiciary, US District Court, Pennsylvania State Trial Judges and the NSW Magistrates and District Court.

REFERENCES


