

## An overview of research and KE on interviewing techniques at University of Abertay Dundee

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Information from victims and eyewitnesses plays a crucial role in criminal investigations worldwide. Dr Fiona Gabbert (Reader in Psychology) and Dr David La Rooy (Lecturer in Psychology) are conducting research aimed at maximising the quality and reliability of evidence obtained in investigations in the pursuit of successful prosecutions, and preventing miscarriages of justice. A growing body of empirical field data collected throughout the UK provides compelling evidence that there is room for improvement of current procedures for eliciting best evidence in investigative interviews (Dando, Wilcock & Milne, 2008; Lamb *et al.*, 2009; La Rooy, Lamb & Memon, 2011). These findings are emerging against a backdrop of economic recession with significant cuts being made to police budgets. The concerns with regards to the investment in research and procedures are obvious as echoed recently by the Association of Chief Police Officers' lead on investigative interviewing in the UK, Chief Constable Mick Creedon "*at a time when police budgets are becoming increasingly stretched, the need to optimise performance, with fewer resources, is now a worrying reality in UK policing*" (Jenkins, 2010). In direct response to these concerns, Dr Gabbert and Dr La Rooy have been working on cutting-edge investigative interview and training procedures that facilitate and promote the accurate collection of evidence that is defensible at all stages in the legal system. Importantly, the projects have been designed to succeed within the constraints of tightening budgets and will deliver savings in the longer term. Two of these projects are outlined below.

The **Self-Administered Interview Project** (SAI©: Gabbert, Hope & Fisher, 2009; Hope, Gabbert & Fisher, 2011) addresses the serious challenge faced by investigators when an incident occurs, and a lack of resources (in terms of time, expertise or

personnel) prevents officers from carrying out interviews with witnesses for days, or sometimes weeks, after the event. During this period of delay, eyewitness memory is under threat in two key ways: (1) forgetting occurs naturally and within hours of the incident, meaning that as the delay between witnessing an event and providing a statement increases, witnesses are only able to provide a 'general' account of events in question, and potentially vital details for an investigation become irretrievably lost, (2) memory is fallible and susceptible to contamination by post-event information encountered between witnessing the event and providing the police with an account of the incident. For example, hearing someone else's version of events could influence the way a witness recalls exactly what they saw, as they may accidentally incorporate information from other witnesses (Gabbert, Memon & Allan, 2011). In direct response to this problem, Dr. Gabbert, along with external colleagues (Dr. Hope and Professor Fisher) and members of her research laboratory at Abertay University, have developed and tested the 'Self-Administered Interview' tool.

The SAI© enables witnesses to provide their own statement by following a series of instructions and questions that are based upon cognitive theories of remembering, and are designed to facilitate recollection. Completing an SAI© after witnessing an incident protects memory against forgetting (Gabbert *et al.*, 2009), and against exposure to post-event misinformation (Gabbert *et al.*, in press). In addition to these benefits, the use of a standardised tool to elicit witness accounts limits any suggestion of 'improper' interviewing techniques and reduces any pressure from police or other interviewers which might be inadvertently perceived by witnesses. In sum, the SAI© is a novel and cost-effective investigative tool, that protects witness memory, elicits critical information effectively and permits the timely prioritisation of witnesses – particularly in situations where limited resources are available to investigators and a traditional interview is not possible.

The Association of Chief Police Officers (in the UK) endorsed field trials of the SAI© in 2008, recognising that the forensic implications of the research for police practice are considerable. Trials of the SAI commenced in January 2010 to establish whether the SAI© can demonstrate practical and evidential benefits to police investigations. Twenty-seven forces (20 from the UK) are currently involved, including Tayside Police in Scotland. Feedback from participating forces has been overwhelmingly positive. The SAI© has made an important contribution to a number of live investigations by providing detailed initial accounts, prioritising witnesses, and facilitating the identification of additional witnesses in incidents including serious road-traffic incidents, assaults, robberies, and – most recently - the terrorist attack on Norway in June 2011. In a relatively short time, the SAI has already had an impact upon policy - it is now standard procedure for some forces that have completed their trial period. A quote from an end-user highlights the impact of this research project:

*“Notably, the SAI is the first empirically-derived interviewing practice development that has been presented to the police in almost 20 years, probably the most valuable additional tool placed at our disposal in the world of investigative interviewing since the adoption of the ‘PEACE’ model of interviewing in the early 1990s, and the introduction of the enhanced cognitive interview model.”*

Ian Hynes, Force Specialist Investigative Interview Manager and Advisor, Greater Manchester Police

The **Child Witnesses Project** focuses on inherently different concerns requiring different solutions. Children are frequently victims of sexual and physical abuse, and accurate evidence gathering from interviews is essential. Relevant findings from developmental and cognitive psychology have been incorporated into interviewing guidelines (for example, Achieving Best Evidence, Home Office, 2011; Scottish Executive, 2011). All experts agree on the importance of using open-ended prompts to allow children to provide accounts of what happened *in their own words* (Lamb, Hershkowitz, Orbach & Esplin, 2008). However, despite this knowledge and guidance, field studies of interview practice in the UK and around the world have routinely found that the quality of investigative interviews is significantly lower than what might be expected, given the seriousness of many cases involving child witnesses. Poor interviewing has a direct effect on the admissibility of evidence in court – in 2007, for example the Scottish Government reported that interviewer inadequacies contributed to the relatively small numbers of child abuse cases that progress to court (less than 1% in some jurisdictions). The reason for poor interviewing has been traced to inadequacies in current approach to training interviewers and in providing them with the ongoing support that they need. Interviewer training programmes tend only to raise awareness of the issues and impart knowledge as to desirable procedures, but do little to *improve interviewer behaviour* (Lamb et al., 2008).

In direct response to this, Dr La Rooy, along with external colleagues (Professor Michael Lamb) and members of his research laboratory at Abertay University, are currently testing a novel interview training procedure, developed in line with findings from educational psychology, that will provide child witness interviewers with the necessary skills to assess the quality of their *own* interviews, and train them to use these skills for their individual continual professional development through ongoing constructive self-assessment. This approach has been piloted with Tayside Police as a bespoke Continual Professional Development (CPD) course and has been well received by those in attendance. Future work is aimed at following the progress of the interviewers to see whether long lasting improvements are found. The research team (including Annabelle Nicol, Ph.D Student) is also

working with Grampian Police on a project aimed at improving existing training. They provide input into the existing Joint Investigative Interviewer training that emphasises a structured approach to interviewing that has proven to be the most effective way of training interviewers (Lamb, La Rooy, Malloy & Katz, 2011). Initial results are very promising showing that in the training exercises interviewers are using approximately 25% of open prompts, a figure that is coming in to line with international standards of best practice. Importantly, the structured approach used by Dr La Rooy restricts poor interviewing practice as evidenced in the fact that the number of inappropriate suggestive questions asked was less the 1% - which is excellent. Future research is aimed at examining whether these positive interviewing behaviours translate to real forensic interviews.

Dr Gabbert and Dr La Rooy are both founding members of the Investigation, Security, Policing & Intelligence (i-spi) Research Group at the University of Abertay. This is a unique multi-disciplinary team of applied researchers, including psychologists, forensic scientists, computer scientists, lawyers and sociologists. Group members have achieved exciting advancements and impacts in the field of policing and criminal justice research. The projects summarised here are just two examples of the police-related research currently underway. For more information about these projects, or about the i-spi research group, please contact Dr Gabbert (f.gabbert@abertay.ac.uk) or Dr La Rooy (david@larooy.net).

## Key References

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