*Strategic interviewing to elicit admissions: Making guilty suspects more forthcoming*

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The current study aimed to alter the counter-interrogation strategies of guilty suspects by influencing their perception of the evidence with the goal of eliciting admissions. Participants (*N* = 90) were asked to perform several mock criminal tasks before being interviewed using one of three interview techniques: (1) Strategic Use of Evidence (SUE) (2) Early Disclosure of Evidence; or (3) A Control interview. Suspects in the SUE condition (vs. other conditions) (1) had more statement-evidence inconsistencies, (2) disclosed more admissions, and (3) perceived the interviewer to have had more information than s/he actually did.

*Keywords*: strategic interviewing, admissions, counter-interrogation strategies

*Learning objective*: The attentive audience member will be able to account for the principles of the Strategic Use of Evidence framework and their utilization in eliciting information from guilty suspects

Suspect interviews should focus on the search for relevant and critical information, such as suspect admissions. Admissions are crime-related facts which provide a basis for inference of guilt or innocence. However research shows that innocent suspects are typically forthcoming with information whereas guilty suspects steer clear of providing self-incriminating information. This raises the question how to elicit admissions from guilty suspects who are otherwise inclined to be withholding? To date, very few studies have addressed specific tactics on eliciting admissions.

The current study tested a novel approach to elicit admissions from guilty suspects during investigative interviews.This new tactical approach is labelled the SUE-CoIn tactic; as the tactic (a) draws on the SUE framework and (b) aims to alter the suspects’ counter-interrogation strategies by Confronting (Co) them with Inconsistencies (In) obtained by strategic interviewing. The SUE-CoIn approach rests on three basic assumptions: (1) suspects’ perception of how much evidence the interviewer holds is malleable, (2) suspects’ perception of the evidence affects their counter-interrogation strategies and (3) the counter-interrogation strategies affect what the suspects reveal or conceal during the interview.

By interviewing in line with the SUE-technique (i.e., asking open-ended questions before disclosing the evidence) the interviewer aimed to obtain statement-evidence inconsistencies for the phases of the crime s/he has evidence on—since the guilty suspect was assumed to use withholding strategies. In the next instance, the interviewer confronted the suspect with these inconsistencies in order to affect his/her perception of the evidence. In turn, the change of perception was assumed to result in a shift in the suspect’s counter-interrogation strategy from a withholding to a more forthcoming strategy. Finally, the interviewer turned to the critical phase of the crime (about which s/he has no evidence). The assumption was that the suspect’s more forthcoming strategy would result in admissions.

A total of 90 adults participated in the study. A between-subjects design was employed. The independent variable was the interview style: SUE-CoIn interview, Early Disclosure interview and Control interview (no disclosure of evidence). The dependent variables were objective analyses of suspects’ verbal behavior (statement-evidence inconsistencies and admissions) and suspects’ subjective ratings of their perceptions of the evidence.

Participants were instructed to imagine themselves as a dedicated member of an activist group. They were to undertake a secret mission as part of a larger operation which was to sabotage a company infamous for harmful animal testing. The mission comprised of three phases, each with a different theme. After performing the tasks participants were interviewed by one of the three interview techniques. Their mission was to convince the interviewer of their innocence. The interviewer supposedly held evidence for two phases (Phase 1 and 2) whereas he/she lacked information in one phase (i.e., the critical phase).

As predicted, the suspects in the SUE-CoIn condition (*M* = 3.63, *SD* = 1.61) produced more statement-evidence inconsistencies than the suspects in the Early Disclosure condition (*M* = 0.77, *SD* = 1.41), *t*(58) = 7.35, *p* < .001, *r* = .68, 95% CI [.51, .79].

As expected, a one-way ANOVA revealed a significant main effect of interview condition on the level of admissions, *F*(2, 87) = 4.74, *p* = .011, *r =* .31, 95% CI [.11, .49]. Planned contrasts showed that the SUE-CoIn condition (*M* = 3.72, *SD* = 2.79) resulted in more admissions compared to the Early Disclosure and Control conditions, *t*(87) = 1.99, *p* = .050, *r* = .21, 95% CI [.003, .40].

As many as 90% (n = 27) of the suspects in the SUE-CoIn condition used a withholding strategy at the onset of the interview. About half of those suspects (n = 12, 44%) then switched to a more forthcoming strategy, either after being confronted with inconsistencies in Phase 1 (n = 7) or in Phase 2 (n = 5) of the interview. Noteworthy, 37% (n = 10) used a withholding strategy from the beginning to the end of the interview, and 18% (n= 5) started off using a withholding strategy, then turned more forthcoming in Phase 2 and, finally became more withholding in Phase 3. In sum, on a group level the suspects in the SUE-CoIn condition demonstrated a bimodal trend with respect to admissions for the critical phase. That is, half of the suspects in this condition became forthcoming, whereas the rest remained withholding.

In the post-interview questionnaire, the participants were required to think back to the interview and rate how much information they believed the interviewer had about the critical phase right before s/he posed questions about this particular phase. A one-way ANOVA showed that the suspects’ perception of the evidence differed across conditions, *F*(2, 87) = 3.66, *p* = .03, *r* = .28, 95% CI [.07, .46]. Planned contrasts revealed that the suspects in the SUE-CoIn condition (*M* = 4.50, *SD*= 1.83) perceived the interviewer as having more information about the critical phase than the suspects interviewed with the Early Disclosure and the Control interviews, *t*(87) = 2.43, *p* = .017, *r =* .25, 95% CI [.04, .43].

By using the SUE-CoIn tactic three goals were achieved: the interviewer (1) elicited cues to deceit (statement-evidence inconsistencies); (2) used these cues to affect the suspects’ perception of the evidence; and (3) elicited admissions in the critical phase. We provided evidence showing that with the SUE framework, it is possible to accomplish multiple goals in an interview. It led to cues to deceit and to admissions, both of which are interview outcomes of great value to prosecutors when building strong cases regarding a suspect’s possible involvement in a crime. Furthermore, we demonstrated that strategic interviewing has the potential to encourage suspects to alter their strategy and become forthcoming. However, more research is needed to understand why some suspects change their initial strategies while others do not.

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