Information-gathering vs accusatory interview style: Individual differences in respondents’ experiences

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Abstract

The present experiment compared information-gathering and accusatory styles of interviewing in terms of respondents’ perceptions of their degree of discomfort and cognitive demand, and the extent to which they felt they had been listened to. Forty truth tellers and forty liars were interviewed about an alleged event via an accusatory or information-gathering interview style. Information-gathering interviews were perceived as more cognitively demanding, although accusatory interviews were perceived as making respondents more uncomfortable. Respondents felt that they were listened to more in information-gathering interviews. We also observed several complex patterns relating interview type, individual differences (shyness), truth status (liars vs. truth tellers) and the respondents’ perceptions of the interview process. The results challenge some common beliefs about interview styles, namely that information-gathering interviews are easier for suspects than accusatory interviews.

Keywords: Deception; Police interviewing; Cognitive demand; Shyness

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1. Introduction

In their analysis of videotaped police interviews with suspects, Moston and Engelberg (1993) observed two different styles in starting an interview: Accusatory and information-gathering style. In the accusatory style, the interviewer confronts the suspect with an accusation (e.g., “I think you have committed the crime”, “Your reactions make me think that you are hiding something from me”). In the information-gathering style, the interviewer does not confront the suspect with an accusation, but rather asks an open question allowing suspects to describe their actions in their own words (e.g., “Describe in as much detail as possible what you did between 3 p.m. and 4 p.m. this afternoon?”). The two interview styles may reflect cultural differences (Gudjonsson, 2003), as the accusatory style is used more in the United States (Inbau, Reid, Buckley, & Jayne, 2001) whereas the information-gathering style is used more in England and Wales (Williamson, 1993).

Several reasons are given for using the information-gathering style. First, it encourages suspects to talk, and therefore it may provide the police with more information about the alleged event (Fisher, Brennan, & McCauley, 2002). Second, because it does not accuse suspects of any wrongdoing, it may be a safeguard against false confessions (Gudjonsson, 2003). Finally, this approach may be seen as more ethical (Williamson, 1993). On the other hand, a possible negative aspect of an information-gathering interview style is that police officers may perceive it as easier to undergo for suspects, as police officers typically favour a “macho” interview style (Sear & Stephenson, 1997).

Research has been conducted on suspects’ perceptions of police interviews (Gudjonsson, 2003; Holmberg & Christianson, 2002), however, because these studies were observational (non-experimental) we cannot determine the causal relation between interviewing style and suspects behaviour (Bull & Milne, 2004; Fisher & Perez, in press). In the present study, we therefore simulated a police interview of a suspect in a controlled environment. We manipulated experimentally the interview style and measured respondents’ (truth tellers and liars) perceptions of the interview.

We question the assumption that an information-gathering style is easier for respondents, especially in terms of the respondent’s cognitive demand. An accusatory interview will put respondents under more pressure than will an information-gathering interview style. As a result, respondents may also experience more discomfort when an accusatory style of interview is adopted. Therefore, in terms of pressure and discomfort, the information-gathering style may well be seen as the easier approach. However, a different picture may emerge in terms of the respondents’ cognitive load. Accusatory interviews may be less cognitively demanding than information-gathering interviews. In an accusatory interview, the respondents’ replies are likely to be simple, short denials of the accusations (“I didn’t do it”, “I am innocent”, etc.). By comparison, in information-gathering interviews, respondents are encouraged to provide detailed and lengthy statements about their activities, which should make their task more cognitively demanding.

Deception researchers suggest that innocent suspects (e.g., truth tellers) and guilty suspects (e.g., liars) experience interviews somewhat differently (Vrij, 2000, 2004). Liars are thought to experience more anxiety than truth tellers, perhaps because they are more anxious about not being believed or being caught out in a lie. In addition, liars are thought to find the interview situation
more cognitively demanding than truth tellers. Liars typically take their credibility less for granted than do truth tellers (Kassin & Gudjonsson, 2004; Kassin & Norwick, 2004), and they may find that their attempt to appear convincing is cognitively demanding (DePaulo et al., 2003). Also, making up a story may be cognitively more demanding than telling the truth, especially when the respondent lacks extensive preparation time.

Being accused of wrongdoing, as in an accusatory interview, may make liars feel uncomfortable, but probably also has a similar effect on truth tellers. Furthermore, whilst being asked to produce lengthy statements (e.g., information-gathering interview) may be more cognitively demanding for liars than producing short denials (e.g., accusatory interview), this may also be the case for truth tellers. In other words, we expect liars and truth tellers to be affected in the same way by the type of interview.

We therefore predicted the following main effects to occur for type of interview and veracity. Respondents would feel more pressure and more discomfort in an accusatory interview (Hypothesis 1), however, they would find the information-gathering interview more cognitively demanding (Hypothesis 2). We further hypothesised that liars would experience more anxiety and more cognitive demand than truth tellers (Hypothesis 3).

We also examined how respondents’ personalities may influence their perceptions of the interview. People who are shy feel tension, discomfort and inhibition when they are with others (Cheek & Buss, 1981). Therefore, shy people may feel undue pressure and discomfort during interviews. They also may be prone to experiencing anxiety during the interview. We expect, therefore, that shyness and pressure/anxiety/discomfort will be related especially in situations where pressure and discomfort are felt most strongly, namely during (a) accusatory interviews and/or (b) when lying. We therefore hypothesised positive correlations between shyness and feeling (i) under pressure, (ii) uncomfortable and (iii) anxious, but only during accusatory interviews and/or when lying (Hypothesis 4). Shy people tend to interact socially less frequently than more outgoing people (Kashy & DePaulo, 1996), perhaps because they are uncomfortable in social interactions. They may also find interviews more cognitively demanding than outgoing people. This difference between shy and outgoing people should be greatest in the most cognitively demanding situations, information-gathering interviews and/or when lying. We therefore predicted a positive correlation between shyness and cognitive demand, but only in information-gathering interviews and/or when lying (Hypothesis 5).

Finally, we examined the extent to which respondents felt that the interviewer was listening to them and had assumed their guilt. Gudjonsson (1994) has suggested that suspects who are normally willing to co-operate may become less co-operative if they believe that they are unfairly treated. A common criticism of police interviewing is that police officers are unwilling to listen to suspects and that they often assume that the suspect is guilty (Moston, Stephenson, & Williamson, 1992). This criticism could well be related to the interview style. We predicted that respondents’ perceptions of the officer being unwilling to listen and assuming guilt would be strongest in accusatory interviews (Hypothesis 6). Finally, we examined the “illusion of transparency”, people’s tendency to overestimate the extent to which their own thoughts, emotions, and other states can be seen by others (Gilovic, Savitsky, & Medvec, 1998; Kassin, 2005). This led us to predict that liars would have a stronger feeling than truth tellers that the interviewer believed that they were guilty (Hypothesis 7).
2. Method

2.1. Participants

The participants were 80 undergraduate students: 48 males and 32 females. Their age ranged from 18 to 46 years old (\(M = 22.23, \text{SD} = 6.60\)).

2.2. Procedure

The experiment took place at a Students Union in a British university. Undergraduates were recruited under the guise of participating in an experiment about “telling a convincing story” with the possibility of earning £15. The participants signed an informed consent form, and were then randomly allocated to the truth telling condition or the deception condition.

The 40 truth tellers participated in a staged event in which they played a game of Connect 4 with a confederate (who posed as another participant). During the game they were interrupted twice, once by a second confederate who came in to wipe a blackboard and a second time by a third confederate who looked for his or her wallet. This latter confederate then claimed that a £10 note had gone missing from the wallet. The participant was then told that s/he would be interviewed about the missing money. This event is a modification of Vrij, Akehurst, Soukara, and Bull (2002).

The 40 liars did not participate in this staged event. Instead, they were asked to take the £10 from the wallet, but to deny having taken this money in a subsequent interview. They were told to tell the interviewer that they played a game of Connect 4. The liars were then given details of the content of the staged event the truth tellers participated in.

Just before the interview started, both liars and truth tellers were told that if they convinced the interviewer that they did not take the money, they would receive £15 for participating in this study; if they did not convince the interviewer, they would have to write a statement about what actually occurred.

In summary, the liars did not engage in any of the activities the truth tellers were engaged in (playing Connect 4, etc.). Instead, the liars took the money out of the wallet, hid it somewhere on their person, and pretended that they were engaged in the truth tellers’ activities. They therefore lied about the entire scenario, including taking £10 from the wallet. The procedure thus reflects a situation where a liar is familiar with the event s/he described but lacks the experience of true participation in that event.

All 80 participants were interviewed by the same uniformed male British police officer. The interviewer was blind to the participants’ condition (truth telling or lying). The interviewer started the interview by saying “£10 has gone missing from a wallet in the room next door and I have to find out whether or not it was you who took it”. After several introductory questions, the actual interview commenced. Participants were allocated randomly to the information-gathering and accusatory conditions. Participants in the information-gathering condition (20 liars and 20 truth tellers) were asked to tell in as much detail as possible what happened when they played Connect 4. Several questions followed, such as: “You just mentioned that someone came into the room who rubbed information off the board. Can you describe that person in detail?”, and “You said that you played a game of Connect 4. Can you describe in detail how the game went?”. 
Participants in the accusation condition (20 liars and 20 truth tellers) were asked eleven questions adapted from Vrij and Winkel (1991), including: “Do you have money in your possession that you have just taken from a wallet?”, “Are you sure you’re telling me the truth?”, “Your reactions make me think that you are hiding something from me”, etc.

The information-gathering interviews lasted significantly longer (M = 250.87 s, SD = 89.8) than the accusatory interviews (M = 87.03 s, SD = 13.7, F(1, 78) = 130.21, p < .01, \( \eta^2 = .63 \)).

After the interview, the participants completed the questionnaire (comprising the shyness personality measure, perceptions of the interview and manipulation checks) in another room. When they returned the questionnaire they were told by the experimenter (who pretended to check with the police officer) that the police officer had considered their story to be convincing.

2.3. Personality measures

Shyness was measured by combining Fenigstein, Scheier, and Buss (1975) social anxiety (5 items) and Cheek and Buss’ (1981) shyness (8 items) scales. The items were clustered into a shyness scale (Cronbach’s alpha = .92). Answers could be given on 4-point Likert scales ranging from (1) untrue to (4) true. The shyness and acting scales correlated negatively with each other, \( r(80) = -.42, p < .01 \). In order to check whether the independent variables had an effect on reported shyness and acting ability, an ANOVA was conducted with Veracity and Interview Style as factors and shyness as the dependent variable. None of the main effects or interaction effects were significant (all \( F's < 3.98 \), all \( p's > .05 \)).

2.4. Dependent variables

Interview pressure was measured with the item “To what extent did you feel you were put under pressure by the interviewer?”. The interviewer’s willingness to listen was measured with two items (\( r(80) = .74, p < .01 \)), including: “To what extent did you feel that the interviewer was really listening to you?”. The interviewer’s assumption that the respondent was guilty was measured with two items (\( r(80) = .33, p < .01 \)), including: “To what extent did you feel that the interviewer believed that you were guilty of taking the money?”. Anxiety was measured with three items (Cronbach’s alpha = .68), including: “During the interview I was physically aroused (for instance an increased heart rate)”. Cognitive load was measured with three items (Cronbach’s alpha = .87), including: “The interview required a lot of thinking”. All answers could be given on 7-point Likert scales ranging from (1) certainly not or definitely not to (7) certainly or definitely. Experiencing discomfort was measured with three Osgood-type 7-point scales (Cronbach’s alpha = .87): pleasant–unpleasant, comfortable–uncomfortable, and positive–negative.

2.5. Manipulation checks

Several manipulation checks were carried out. Participants were asked (i) to what extent they were motivated to appear convincing during the interview, (ii) what they thought the likelihood was of receiving the £10, and (iii) what they thought the likelihood was of being made to write a statement. Answers could be given on Likert scales ranging from (1) very unlikely to (7) very likely.
3. Results

3.1. Manipulation checks

The mean score on the motivation item was $M = 5.45$ (SD = 1.3), and only six participants (7.5%) indicated that they were not motivated (scoring lower than 4 on the Likert scale). Twenty-two participants (28%) thought it unlikely that they would receive the £10 incentive, whereas 31 participants (39%) thought it likely that they would receive the money. The mean scores for the incentive (£10) and penalty (statement) indices were $M = 4.18$ (SD = 1.4) and $M = 3.68$ (SD = 1.4), respectively. In other words, most participants were motivated and the incentive and penalty appeared realistic to them. The experimental manipulations (Interview Style and Veracity) had no effect on these three variables (all $F$'s < 2.19).

3.2. Hypothesis testing

In order to test Hypotheses 1, 2, 3, 6, and 7 a MANOVA was conducted utilising a 2(Interview Style) x 2(Veracity) factorial design with “pressure”, “listen”, “guilty”, “discomfort”, “anxiety” and “cognitive load” as dependent variables. The multivariate test revealed main effects for Interview Style, $F(6,71) = 48.07, p < .01, \eta^2 = .80$, and Veracity, $F(6,71) = 4.17, p < .01, \eta^2 = .26$.

At a univariate level, the Interview Style factor showed significant effects for listening, $F(1,76) = 288.41, p < .01, \eta^2 = .79$, assuming guilt, $F(1,76) = 53.43, p < .01, \eta^2 = .41$, experiencing discomfort, $F(1,76) = 12.35, p < .01, \eta^2 = .14$, and experiencing cognitive load, $F(1,76) = 7.36, p < .01, \eta^2 = .09$. Participants in the accusatory condition felt that the interviewer listened less ($M = 2.43$, SD = 1.0) to them and believed more that they were guilty ($M = 5.13$, SD = 1.2) than participants in the information-gathering condition ($M = 5.99$, SD = 1.0 and $M = 3.26$, SD = 1.2, respectively). This supports Hypothesis 6. Moreover, participants in the accusatory condition experienced more discomfort ($M = 4.39$, SD = 1.4) than participants in the information-gathering condition ($M = 3.38$, SD = 1.2), partially supporting Hypothesis 1. Finally, participants in the information-gathering condition experienced more cognitive load ($M = 4.23$, SD = 1.3) than participants in the accusatory condition ($M = 3.36$, SD = 1.5), supporting Hypothesis 2.

At a univariate level, the Veracity factor showed significant effects for assuming guilt, $F(1,76) = 9.55, p < .01, \eta^2 = .11$, feeling anxious, $F(1,76) = 12.00, p < .01, \eta^2 = .14$, and experiencing cognitive load, $F(1,76) = 3.33, p < .05$, one-tailed, $\eta^2 = .04$. As predicted in Hypothesis 3, liars were more anxious ($M = 4.64$, SD = 1.4) and experienced more cognitive load ($M = 4.08$, SD = 1.4) than truth tellers ($M = 3.54$, SD = 1.4 and $M = 3.50$, SD = 1.6, respectively). Finally, in support of Hypothesis 7, liars were more inclined to think that the interviewer believed them to be guilty ($M = 4.59$, SD = 1.3) than truth tellers ($M = 3.80$, SD = 1.7).

The multivariate Veracity x Interview Style effect was not significant, $F(6,71) = .95, ns$, indicating that different interview styles had similar effects on liars and truth tellers.

Hypothesis 1 predicted that participants would experience more pressure during accusatory interviews than information-gathering interviews. This was not the finding: Participants found both styles equally pressuring and further analyses revealed an explanation for this. Accusatory interviews were not perceived as more pressuring because information-gathering interviews were
seen as more cognitively demanding, and this increased cognitive demand has contributed to the perceived pressure in information-gathering interviews. When we conducted an ANOVA with Interview Style as factor and perceived pressure as dependent variable, the Interview Style effect was not significant, $F(1,77) = 1.99$, ns. However, when Perceived Cognitive Demand was added as a covariate, the effect was significant, $F(1,77) = 3.00$, $p < .05$, one-tailed, $\eta^2 = .04$, with the accusatory interview being perceived as more pressuring (M = 3.98, SD = 1.7) than the information-gathering interview (M = 3.48, SD = 1.5).

In order to test Hypotheses 4 and 5, Pearson correlations were carried out between shyness and the six dependent variables. Three significant correlations emerged: The more shy participants reported themselves as being, the more they felt under pressure ($r(80) = .28$, $p < .05$), the more anxious they were ($r(80) = .26$, $p < .05$), and the more cognitively demanding they found the interviews ($r(80) = .27$, $p < .05$).

Table 1 presents the Pearson correlation results broken down by interview style, veracity and the interaction between interview style and veracity.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pressure</th>
<th>Discomfort</th>
<th>Anxiety</th>
<th>Load</th>
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<tr>
<td>Information-gathering (N = 40)</td>
<td>.36*</td>
<td>.23</td>
<td>.49**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accusation (N = 40)</td>
<td>.23</td>
<td>.29*</td>
<td>.06</td>
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<tr>
<td>Truth tellers (N = 40)</td>
<td>.35*</td>
<td>.19</td>
<td>.25</td>
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<tr>
<td>Liars (N = 40)</td>
<td>.20</td>
<td>.38*</td>
<td>.30*</td>
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<tr>
<td>Accusation and truth (N = 20)</td>
<td>.34</td>
<td>.19</td>
<td>.15</td>
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<tr>
<td>Accusation and lie (N = 20)</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>.40*</td>
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<td>.31</td>
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<td>.56**</td>
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<td>Information-gathering and truth (N = 20)</td>
<td>.40*</td>
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* $p < .05$.
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Table 1 presents the Pearson correlation results broken down by interview style, veracity and the combination of interview style and veracity. Since the variables “listening” and “guilty” did not yield significant effects in the overall results, and no hypotheses were formulated about them, they were deleted from further analyses.

Shyness was never significantly correlated with feeling uncomfortable. Shyness was positively correlated with feeling under pressure but only in the information-gathering and truth telling interviews. Hypothesis 4 predicted this correlation would be the strongest in accusatory and deceptive interviews. In agreement with Hypothesis 4, there were positive correlations between shyness and anxiety only in accusatory interviews, and when lying. Finally, supporting Hypothesis 5, there were positive correlations between shyness and cognitive demand but only in information-gathering interviews, and when lying.
4. Discussion

4.1. Interview style

The present experiment demonstrated that participants experienced more discomfort during accusatory interviews (supporting Hypothesis 1), whereas they found information-gathering interviews cognitively more demanding (supporting Hypothesis 2). Unexpectedly, they found both interviewing styles equally pressuring. Why weren’t accusatory interviews perceived as more pressuring than information-gathering interviews (Hypothesis 1)? Our data showed that information-gathering interviews were seen as more cognitively demanding, and this demand contributed to the perceived pressure in information-gathering interviews. The findings regarding cognitive demand and pressure dispute the notion that information-gathering interviews are easier to undergo for suspects than accusatory interviews. Finally, information-gathering interviews gave participants a stronger feeling that they were being listened to, and a lesser impression that the interviewer assumed that they were guilty. This supported Hypothesis 6.

It is perhaps unfair to suggest that police officers use either an accusatory style or an information-gathering style, in practice elements of both styles may well be incorporated in one interview. Our results predict that the more information-gathering these interviews are, the more demanding the interview will be perceived to be, whereas, the more accusatory these interviews are, the more discomfort a suspect will experience.

4.2. Veracity

Although liars were more anxious than truth tellers and also found the interviews more cognitively challenging than truth tellers (supporting Hypothesis 3), liars and truth tellers were affected in the same way by the type of interview (accusatory or information-gathering). In other words, the positive effects of an information-gathering interview style, outlined above, apply to both guilty and innocent suspects.

Our findings should have important implications for both guilty and innocent suspects. Holmberg and Christianson (2002) examined murderers’ and sexual offenders’ experiences of Swedish police interviews and found that guilty suspects who felt that they were respected and listened to, were more likely to make admissions during the interview. Holmberg and Christianson’s (2002) study was observational rather than experimental, and, as a result, they could not establish causal relationships between interview style and suspects’ perceptions of the interview. However, Holmberg and Christianson speculated that when guilty suspects thought they were treated with respect and were listened to, they would be more comfortable to reveal criminal behaviour without being condemned as individuals. This suggests that information-gathering interviews could result in more admissions from guilty suspects than accusatory interviews. Research has further revealed that innocent suspects sometimes falsely confess to crimes because they can no longer face the discomfort created by the police interview (Gudjonsson, 2003). The finding that an information-gathering style creates less discomfort may therefore offer a safeguard against false confessions.

Although the interviews were conducted in exactly the same fashion for liars and truth tellers, liars nevertheless had a stronger feeling that the interviewer believed that they were guilty, sup-
porting Hypothesis 7 (“illusion of transparency” principle). Alternatively, guilty respondents may have believed that the interviewer “must be good at his job” and therefore would know that they were lying. The notion that police officers are good lie detectors, however, does not reflect reality (Vrij, 2004).

4.3. Personality

Participants’ perceptions of the interview were influenced by their personality. As we predicted in Hypothesis 4, the more shy participants considered themselves as being, the more anxious they felt in the two potentially most anxiety-provoking settings: The accusatory interviews or when lying. Also, supporting Hypothesis 5, the more shy participants reported themselves as being, the more cognitively challenging they found the potentially most challenging interview conditions: The information-gathering interview or while lying. In other words, individual differences in anxiety and cognitive demand do emerge, but only under specific conditions: The setting needs to be potentially anxiety-provoking for differences in anxiety to emerge, and must be potentially cognitively demanding for differences in cognitive demand to emerge. We obtained a similar finding in an experiment examining individual differences in verbal fluency (Vrij et al., 2002). Verbally skilled individuals were more fluent than less-verbally skilled individuals but only in verbally challenging interview conditions. This finding has methodological implications. It suggests that (a) one ought to design experiments that are appropriately challenging or anxiety provoking in order to detect some individual differences, (b) failures to find individual differences might occur because the interview settings are not challenging or anxiety-provoking enough, and (c) other individual differences may be revealed only when some other dimension (other than degree of challenge or anxiety) is at a specific value.

One puzzling finding, which we cannot explain, is that experiencing discomfort was not related to personality. We initially considered the statistical argument that our measure of experiencing discomfort was simply insensitive. That argument is contra-indicated, however, because discomfort was affected by Interview Type. That is, discomfort was sensitive enough to detect at least some effects. In retrospect, had we used the five-factor model of personality, which is theoretically better grounded, we may have observed a more clear pattern of results.

Feeling under pressure, on the other hand, was related to personality. The more shy participants reported themselves to be, the more under pressure they felt during the interview. However, this relationship did not occur in the potentially most pressuring interviews (accusatory and deceptive), but in the interviews that were potentially least pressing, i.e., the information-gathering and truth telling interviews. We can only speculate about these findings. Perhaps, shy people, and shy truth tellers in particular, tend to take their credibility for granted more than non-shy people and non-shy truth tellers in particular, resulting in finding it irritating, and therefore pressuring, when so much is expected from them in order to convince the interviewer. Alternatively, shy people may find the information-gathering interview more pressuring simply because they are expected to generate longer narrative responses, rather than just saying yes or no. As a result, they become the centre of attention. Both speculations highlight the vulnerability of shy, truth telling, suspects during information-gathering interviews and police detectives should be aware of this.
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