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Communities Giving Voice to Sexual Assault Victims

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COGNITIVE INTERVIEW TECHNIQUE

DEFINITION

GOAL

The goal of the *Cognitive Interview Technique* (CIT) is for the interviewer to infer the subject's mental representation of the incident and then structure the interview so as to be compatible with the representation.

The *Cognitive Interview Technique* is based on two accepted principles of memory:

1. Memory is composed of a collection of several elements. The more elements a memory retrieval aid has in common with the member of the event, the more effective the aid.
2. Memory has several access routes, so information that is not accessible with one retrieval cue may be accessible with a different cue.

Memory of an event, criminal or otherwise, is enhanced when the psychological environment at the interview is similar to the environment at the original crime.

During the interview the subject must be encouraged to concentrate on recalling the event in great detail. Any disruption, such as physical disturbances or interviewer interruption during a subject's free narrative will impair recall. After several interruptions the subject will begin to anticipate them and will tailor their answers to fit into the perceived abbreviated time frame inadvertently established by the interviewer.

It is not a natural process to extensively search one's memory and subjects will often resist, thus continuous encouragement on the part of the interviewer is required.

The *Cognitive Interview Technique* requires the subject to provide extended, detailed answers. Interviewers cannot rush the subject but rather emphasize that the extra mental concentration is valuable.

TECHNIQUES OF THE COGNITIVE INTERVIEW

The interviewer utilizes four main techniques to "jog" the subject's memory. These are described to the subject prior to the free narrative. In addition, seven supporting techniques are utilized to elicit specific items of information from the subject. These techniques are used following the free narrative.

MAIN TECHNIQUES USED IN THE COGNITIVE INTERVIEW

The first two methods attempt to increase the overlap of elements between the stored memory and retrieval sites. The last two methods encourage the use of many retrieval paths.

1. Reconstruct the Circumstances

The investigator instructs the subject to reconstruct the incident in general, for example:

"I want you to think about what happened last night. What the room looked like. The furniture in the room the weather outside, the lighting, the people that you met. I also want you to think about how you were feeling at the time and how you reacted to the event."

These instructions serve to focus the subject on external (e.g., weather), emotional (e.g., feeling of fear) and cognitive (e.g., relevant thoughts that occurred at the time) cues.

2. Report Everything

People have a tendency to hold back information because they do not believe the information is important. During the interview, the investigator instructs the subject to not edit anything, for example:

"I want you to tell me everything that you can remember even if you do not believe it is important. Sometimes things that appear irrelevant turn out to be invaluable."

3. Recall the Events in a Different Order

This method encourages the subject to use an alternate retrieval path. Reverse order forces the subject to examine their memory looking for benchmarks. When events are recalled in chronological order, subjects often reconstruct in their minds what must have happened based on prior knowledge of similar events resulting in incomplete or even inaccurate reports. Changing the order also assists in identifying subjects who are fabricating events. An example of the investigator's instruction might be:

"After you relate the incident to me from start to finish I may ask you to recall the event in reverse order."

4. Change Perspective

Subjects recall the incident from different perspectives that they may have had at the time or adopt the perspectives of others who were present during the incident. Subjects may be instructed to place themselves in the role of the primary character in the incident and think about what they must have seen.

4. **Change Perspective** (cont'd)

Changing perspective serves to enhance the completeness of reports. Subjects often have viewed the incident from a variety of perspectives but tend to report what they remember from one, static perspective.

Note: This technique is extremely difficult for and should not be used with children. Developmentally, children are in an egocentric phase and have difficulty with taking a different perspective. As perspective is developed with age, children will guess what another person would have seen rather than state what they actually would have observed.

Finally, subjects do not have an accurate idea of what information has investigative value. The use of the CIT often leads a subject to recall a significant detail through association with something insignificant.

SUPPORTING TECHNIQUES

CIT also employs seven supporting techniques to assist an investigator in eliciting specific items of information. As stated above, these are used following the free narrative phase of the interview.

1. **Specific mnemonics** (find definition)

A variety of mnemonics can be utilized to assist in the retrieval of specific pieces of information. These methods focus on partial information when whole responses are not available.

- Physical appearance:
 - Did the suspect remind you of anyone? If so, why?
 - Was there anything unusual about the suspect's physical appearance?
 - refined vs. rough
 - pleasant vs. unpleasant
 - trustworthy vs. deceitful
- Clothing:
 - Was the suspect neat or sloppy?
 - What colour was the suspect wearing?
 - How was the suspect dressed?
- Names:
 - If the subject believes a name was spoken but is unable to remember what it was, have the subject think of the first letter of the name by going through the alphabet.

1. Specific Mnemonics (cont'd)

- Did the name remind subject of someone else's name. If so, why?
- Specific or conspicuous features of the name such as:
 - ethnic background
 - common or uncommon name
 - length
 - number of syllables
 - emphasis of syllables

2. Number Sequences

- Subject should be encouraged to think about:
 - sequence repeated
 - ascending or descending
 - mostly odd or even
 - made up of straight lines (7-1-4) or were they circular (0-8-6-9)
 - letters present in the number sequence
 - number of digits

3. Speech characteristics

- Did the voice remind you of someone else's voice. If so, why?
- Was there anything unusual about the voice?
 - did suspect sound educated?
 - were any unusual words used?
 - could any particular accent be determined?

4. Conversation

- What were the subject's reactions to what was said ?
- What were the reactions of others?
- Were any unusual words or phrases used?

5. Question Repetition

- Leading versus Non-Leading Questions
 - avoid direct, short answer questions such as:
"What color was his coat?"
 - ask open-ended questions such as:
"How was he dressed?"
- Short answer questions cause a subject to search memory superficially. Specific information that is not given by a subject in answer to an open-ended question can then be probed directly with a short answer question.

6. Extensive Retrieval

- The more attempts the subject makes to retrieve a particular incident, the more information will be recalled. Many people, especially the elderly, will stop retrieval attempts after the first try. Subjects should be encouraged to **conduct** as **many** retrieval attempts as possible, even if they claim they cannot recall anything else.
- Silence serves to encourage subject retrieval as it gives the impression that a more complete response is expected from the interviewer. For example, after the subject has given narrative answer, wait five seconds before next question or prompt. This technique causes the subject to search their memory more extensively.
- Avoid questions in the negative form as they discourage extensive retrieval, e.g., “*You wouldn’t remember his name would you?*” Similarly, questions prefaced with “*This will not take long*” gives the impression of time restriction and consequently memory will not be searched extensively.
- If the subject believes the interviewer is repeating the same question their retrieval will cease. Alter the wording of questions to make them appear different. For example, the word weapon could be substituted for gun. If the question is perceived to be the same, the answer will likely be the same.

7. Subject Compatible Questioning

- Information about an incident will be stored and organized uniquely by each subject. Some subjects will categorize by categorize according to their five senses. Successful retrieval will depend on how compatible the question is to the form in which the subject has organized the information.
- A rigid style of questioning is ineffective as it forces the subject to adjust their mental recall to the needs of the interviewer rather than the incident. Therefore, the interviewer must determine which mental picture the subject is focusing on then direct their questions towards that particular mental picture.
- As subjects will answer questions based on mental pictures they have of an incident, questions should be presented in order thus forcing the subject to search their memory of one mental picture at a time. It is important to completely exhaust one mental image before proceeding to the next one.

FOLLOW-UP INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Did the subject have an adequate opportunity to observe the suspect?

- length of *time* the subject observed the suspect
- distance between the subject and the suspect
- extent to which the suspect's features were visible and undisguised
- lighter lack of light at the place and time of observation
- presence or absence of distracting noises or activity during the observation
- any other circumstances affecting the subject's opportunity to observe the suspect committing the crime

Did the subject have the capacity to observe the suspect *committing* the crime? Was the subject's capacity impaired by:

- stress or fright at the time *of* the observation
- personal motivations, biases or prejudices
- uncorrected visual defects
- fatigue or injury
- drugs or alcohol

Was the subject sufficiently attentive to the suspect at the time of the crime?

- did the subject know that *crime* was being committed at the time the subject was observing the suspect?

Was the subject's identification of the suspect completely the product of the subject's own memory?

- the length of time that passed between the subject's original observation and that subject's identification of the suspect
- the subject's capacity and state of mind at the time of the identification
- the subject's exposure to opinions, descriptions or identifications given by other subjects, photographs, newspaper accounts or anything else that may have affected the independence of that subject's identification
- any instances when the subject failed to identify the suspect
- any instances when the subject gave a description of the suspect that was inconsistent with the suspect's appearance

