
A Police Detective's Perspective on Investigating Interview Techniques

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I was raised in a safe, suburban neighborhood in Northern Virginia in the United States and was lucky enough to have an uneventful, crime-free childhood. The only time I can remember thinking about the criminal justice system was after our neighbor crashed his motorcycle into a tree across the street from my house and a few officers arrived to investigate, but all that changed when I entered high school and read the book *Helter Skelter* by Vincent Bugliosi and Curt Gentry. This true crime novel describes Charles Manson's rise as a charismatic cult leader, the 1969 Tate-LaBianca Murders, and the successful prosecutions of Manson and others who were involved in those shocking homicides.

While not a typical reading choice for a teenager, I became fascinated with *Helter Skelter* and its portrayal of a criminal mastermind, which made me decide right then and there that I wanted to understand why people engage in criminal behavior, so I started reading crime novels, using class projects as excuses to research serial killers, and taking psychology and sociology elective courses to get an inside look of the criminal mind. But instead of satisfying this itch, these actions only deepened my captivation with the subjects and ending up shaping most of my academic and professional decisions over the last 18 years, from earning higher-level degrees in criminal justice and forensic psychology, working for the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) in the Behavioral Analysis Units (where "criminal profiling" originated), and joining a local sheriff's office with hopes of becoming a detective so that I might use my academic knowledge to bring offenders to justice.

As a new deputy with the sheriff's office, I attended a regional police academy, where I was taught an overview of how to be a law enforcement officer, from writing reports, driving a police cruiser, shooting a firearm, the legal definitions of crimes, how to protect myself in case of a physical altercation, and how to arrest someone should I gather sufficient probable cause to do so. Although this may sound comprehensive, all of this was taught in a span of five months, so most of the instructional blocks were a maximum of four hours long, which was just enough time for the staff to teach the basics, but not long enough to fully explore any of the topics and/or tailor their courses to my specific agency. That's where field training came in.

After graduating from the academy, I spent three months in a field training program (FTO), during which I was assigned three different field training officers from my agency. I spent a month with each of them, riding side-by-side in their cruisers, going with them to calls for service, and learning how my agency expected officers to act and to engage with the public. Yes, the academy is important for instilling the basics, but FTO is how new officers gain hands-on experience, develop the skills they will use for the rest of their careers, and find out that being an officer is nothing like the police procedurals on television. For example, FTO is when

I learned that most of what police officers do is interview people involved in incidents and then document what they learned in reports.

FTO is also when I learned that most police officers are inadequately trained in interviewing, from the science behind trauma to the different types of questions to the variety of interview styles an interviewer may choose to use. During the academy, I spent at least 40 hours at the gun range honing my firearm skills and another 40 hours at the driving range learning defensive driving skills, but I only spent approximately four hours learning how to interview people, which means that I spent at least 80 hours on skills that I was rarely going to use during my career and only four hours on a skill that I would use every day.

I believe the American policing community gets away with this imbalance by saying that officers need to know how to handle a weapon in order to keep the public safe during emergencies and that they can learn other skills, like interviewing, by taking in-service education courses throughout their career, and the policing community as a whole is not wrong; my state requires all sworn law enforcement officers to take at least 40 hours of relevant continuing education every two years to maintain their certifications, so officers were often going back to the academy for in-service courses, which offered more in-depth looks at various topics, but the courses are subject to availability and personal preference. For example, I wanted to become a detective, so I registered for investigative and interview courses, which allowed me to hone my investigative skills, get more information from those involved in my cases, and have more thorough investigations that I could present at court, but I knew some officers who chose to pursue courses about high-risk tactics and defensive skills since they were more interested in joining takedown teams than specialized investigative units.

After a short three years, I achieved my then professional dream and was promoted to detective. I was assigned to various units within the Criminal Investigations Division (CID), but spent much of my time as a detective in the Special Victims Unit, investigating sex crimes and/or crimes against children. These investigations were difficult, not only because many were the colloquial “he-said-she-said” investigations with little forensic evidence, but also because the crimes themselves were sensitive and often disturbing in nature. In fact, I am still haunted by some offenders I was unable to hold accountable for their actions, but I often find some solace from cases in which I was able to bring the perpetrator to justice.

As I gained more experience as a detective and took even more investigative courses, I learned to tailor my interview style to the specific case and to the specific person I was interviewing. For example, if I were assigned a case in which a 13-year-old accused her uncle of molestation, I would likely use a forensic interview style, such as Child First, and would spend more time building rapport with the teen until she felt comfortable disclosing the abuse rather than asking pointed questions, but if I were interviewing her uncle, I may take a different approach. To me, this case-by-case method to interviewing was obvious, but I quickly learned that I was an anomaly and that not everyone assigned to CID felt this way.

While talking with my colleagues, I learned that most of my fellow detectives attended one interview course throughout their careers, typically around the time of their promotion, and then formed their own way of interviewing that was based on their training and professional experiences. In fact, it seemed that the more veteran detectives were often the ones most

resistant to change and, if they were mandated to attend a course about an interview technique that was different than the one they normally used, they often failed to pay attention to the new material and sometimes even ridiculed the training. For example, while talking with a newer, more open-minded detective assigned to an elite investigative unit, I learned that the more experienced detectives in her unit often chastised her for prioritizing actionable intelligence (information that can be independently checked to either prove or disprove someone's statement) over confessions while she questioned suspects because they were trained to seek a confession above all else.

This fixation on a confession reminds me of tunnel vision or "a compendium of common heuristics and logical fallacies" (Martin, 2002), which often occurs during investigations when a detective believes a person to be guilty of the crime and then discounts (or doesn't even recognize) evidence to the contrary, which can lead to a fumbled investigation, false confessions, and/or false convictions (Martin, 2002). These investigative problems exploded into the forefront of criminology in the 1990s when DNA tests of inmates proved their innocence even though many gave confessions during their respective investigations, which prompted many researchers to study how these miscarriages of justice occurred and whether police interview techniques were a contributing factor (Kassin, Appleby, and Perillo, 2010).

The PEACE method developed out of this movement, is a research-based interview style that values non-accusatory, open-ended questions to gather the most information from the subject as possible (Kassin, Appleby, and Perillo, 2010). PEACE is an acronym that stands for the different stages of an interview: preparation and planning, engage and explain, account, closure, and evaluate. The evaluation stage is unique to the PEACE model and has encouraged many studies on the technique's effectiveness as it applies to different types of crime and has led this method to be adopted as the interviewing standard in British policing (Izotovas, Kelly, and Walsh, 2021),

Conversely, there is currently no standardized interviewing technique at any level of law enforcement in the United States; in fact, interview training varies so greatly that even two officers within the same agency rarely receive the same interview training throughout their careers. However, the REID technique is the one most fictionalized in American television and movies and is seen as quintessentially American. This method breaks down the conversations with suspects into two parts: a non-confrontational interview that is supposed to help the interviewer determine how the suspect lies, and the confrontational interrogation aimed at eliciting a confession (Kassin, Appleby, and Perillo, 2010).

I first learned about the REID technique when I was studying forensic psychology and determined that REID was not a good match for my natural interview style, so, throughout my law enforcement career, I purposely chose to avoid REID-based courses and to focus on models with greater scientific foundations, including a one-day, introductory course on motivational interviewing, during which I started thinking about the other interview courses I had attended. I thought about their similarities and differences and about how useful it would be to know which techniques gathered the most usable information specific to a certain type of crime. For example, do rape survivors respond better to forensic-style interviews than cognitive ones? Do child abuse suspects provide more actionable intelligence, not just confessions, when interviewers use PEACE-style interviews rather than the REID model?

After this class, I looked at the current literature to find some answers, but instead found mostly gaps because while there were many studies on the strengths and weaknesses of each interview style, few compared two or more techniques to determine which one obtained more information on which the interviewer could follow up, and while there were some studies researching how well a certain interview style (for example, PEACE, or motivational) fares with victims of certain crimes, very few looked at how the same type worked with suspects, and there were even fewer studies that broke down the efficacy of the interview model by crime offender typologies (for example: rape offenders who have been categorized into different types of rapists based on several factors, including the criminal acts, motivation, and personality as described in *The Handbook of Sexual Assault and Sexual Assault Prevention*).

Since the research failed to answer my questions, ones that could potentially help law enforcement better their investigations and help more victims have the justice they deserved, I decided to become a postgraduate researcher at the University of Kent so that I could fill these empirical gaps. This year, I plan to conduct two literature reviews, one investigating the various interview styles currently being taught to law enforcement officers and one looking at crime offender typologies, and then conducting my own study with actual police interviews to compare the PEACE and REID interview styles to see how much actionable intelligence they gather from offender interviews based on the offender's characteristics. This is a hefty undertaking, so I am planning to focus on rape offenders, which gives me the opportunity to expand my research to other crime types in the future, and while my study may not give law enforcement all the answers, I am hopeful that it may help officers learn more about the different interview styles available to them and how choosing a specific style based on their subject's typology may help advance their investigations more than a confession.

References

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