Cognitive Interview Conducted In-Person and Over-the-Phone For Informants' Memory of Overheard Conversations

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Source Article

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Take Home Messages

- A laboratory simulation study compared the Cognitive Interview to the standard police interview for informants' memories of a conversation. The interviews were conducted live or on the telephone.
- The Cognitive Interview elicited 61% more relevant details than the standard interview. There was no difference between interviews conducted in-person versus on the telephone.
- The results suggest that the Cognitive Interview will be a beneficial tool for eliciting details about overheard conversations. Furthermore, information will not be lost if the interview is conducted over the telephone.

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Why did the researchers conduct the study?

In human-intelligence-gathering contexts, persons of interest are often interviewed about a conversation they overheard. The information gathered from these conversations may be important for national security; therefore, one goal is to elicit extensive accurate information. The source article was conducted to extend the previous literature on the Cognitive Interview (CI) and addressed 3 goals: (1) test the CI in the context of memory for conversations, (2) compare interviews conducted in-person to interviews conducted over the telephone, and (3) examine the efficiency of the CI.

The CI is a theory-based interview protocol that has been shown in over 100 laboratory and field studies to enhance witness reporting by approximately 30%-70% compared to standard police interviews (SI), while maintaining comparable accuracy rates.[1] Previously only a few studies have examined the CI for recalling conversations. Some studies examined only a small subset of CI techniques, while others only had conversational recall as a small part of total recall.

Currently, no research studies have compared in-person to telephone interviews in information-gathering contexts. Yet, telephone interviews are often used in real-world criminal investigations, frequently with informants, because telephone interviews are convenient and inexpensive. Law enforcement officers, however, have expressed concern that advanced interviewing techniques, like the CI, will not be as beneficial over the telephone as they are in-person.

Although the CI has been effective in gathering more relevant details than traditional law enforcement techniques, it has been criticized for being inefficient, either because it takes too long to complete the interview, or because it gathers a lot of irrelevant information. Therefore, the source article measured the amount of irrelevant information produced by both the CI and SI interviews. Irrelevant information referred to any witness statement that police would not rely upon to solve a crime (e.g., "Please repeat the question" or "I wasn't sure what to do"); relevant information referred to witness statements that police would use to solve the crime (e.g., "the robber mentioned the name Sam").

How did the researchers conduct the study?

Seventy-nine participants were told to play the role of an undercover informant to help police solve an upcoming crime. Participants were then randomly assigned to listen to one of three audio-recorded conversations about an upcoming crime (stealing test answers, smuggling drugs from Mexico, and robbing a house). Each overheard conversation had at least three distinct speakers and mentioned days, times, and locations of the upcoming crime. After a two-day delay participants were interviewed by trained student-interviewers with either a CI or a SI. The interview took place either in-person or over the telephone. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and coded to examine the information that was recalled.

Standard interviews (SI) began with rapport building and then an open-ended question, "Please tell me everything you remember overhearing." After the participants answered the question, student interviewers asked an average of five additional follow-up questions. The Cognitive Interviews (CI) also started off with rapport building, however, unlike the SI, during rapport building the interviewer also developed appropriate social dynamics, which included encouraging the informant to participate actively, to generate information without waiting to be asked questions, and not to guess. The interviewer then developed the appropriate communication instruction by presenting the informant with a model statement to illustrate the amount of detail the interviewees were expected to generate. The model statement was a brief detailed account of an event that happened to the interviewer that morning. The model statement lasted approximately one minute and was unique for each participant, so the model statement did not sound rehearsed. The interviewer then helped the informant to reinstate the context by instructing the informant to close their eyes and think back to when they first overheard the conversation. Once the informant had developed a mental image, the interviewer asked the same open-ended question that was asked in the SI: "Please tell me everything you remember overhearing." As with the SI, the CI interviewers did not interrupt during the informant's free recall. An average of five additional follow-up questions were asked. For both the SI and CI, the interview ended when the interviewee reported that they had no further information.

What did the researchers find?

Interviewees in the CI condition produced 61% more relevant units of information than those in the SI condition, and at comparable levels of accuracy, suggesting that the CI is an effective tool for eliciting conversation details. In addition, there were no significant effects of modality, suggesting that interviewers will not lose vital information when conducting interviews over the telephone (compared to in-person). Finally, there was no evidence that the CI was less efficient than the SI (no significant difference was found in the proportion of irrelevant statements provided across these two conditions).

How can the police use these findings?

The source article demonstrated that the CI is an efficient tool and investigators should strongly consider using it when gathering intelligence information that was overheard in conversation. Additionally, the study found that using the CI over the telephone did not impair the quantity or accuracy of gathered information. This finding has important practical implications. In real-life investigations, it may be safer for informants or other witnesses to be interviewed by law enforcement investigators over the telephone instead of in-person (i.e., so the informant or witness is not seen walking into the police station). Certainly, it is more convenient and economical to interview via telephone.

References

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