



Improving Communication Skills in Patrol Officers: A Training Study of Evidence-based Interviewing

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ABSTRACT

Research Summary. Very little research has examined interviewing practices and their training in patrol officers. This paper argues for training patrol officer in evidence-based interviewing skills and describes results of an evaluation of a training for patrol officers. We trained a sample of frontline officers in evidence-based interviewing techniques, including information about the psychological research behind the use of investigative interviewing, good questioning practices, and rapport-building techniques. Trainees responded to knowledge, behavioral, and attitudinal questions before and after the training. We found improved knowledge in five different areas as well as positive perceptions of the training.

Policy Implications. Research over the past decade has helped develop and advocate for the use of ethical interviewing techniques in the interrogation room (Meissner et al., 2017). Our paper brings this evidence from investigative interviewing studies into the field by applying a robust body of research to patrol settings, where many interviews take place.

Keywords: policing, patrol, interviewing, training



Introduction

Despite decades of efforts to improve community policing practices, police-community relations remain a major concern in the United States (Morin et al., 2017). The majority of surveyed U.S. police chiefs cited that the most important issue they face is working to increase civilians' trust in the police (Police Executive Research Forum, 2020). This echoes recommendations from the President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing (2015). The Proceedings of the National Institute of Justice's 2018 Chiefs' Panel on Priority Law Enforcement Issues and Needs further observed that police-community relations need to be strengthened and that law enforcement must gain the trust of the many communities that feel disparately treated by police (Hollywood et al., 2019). These communities' distrust is compounded by frontline officers' lack of "soft" skills training, such as communication, that could improve community relations. Most police academies devote less than 2% of training time to communication (Reaves, 2016; Sloan & Paoline, 2021; Bradford & Pynes, 1999), and even less time to interviewing skills. Inadequate interviewing skills risk alienating community members and missing crucial information at the outset of investigations. Given frontline officers' extensive interactions with the public, training in evidence-based interviewing could provide substantial and widespread benefits.

The benefits of evidence-based interviewing are already well established in formal interviewing and interrogation settings (Meissner, 2021; Catlin et al., 2024; Meissner et al., 2017) and detectives are frequently taught this skillset (Kingshott et al., 2015). Yet, there is little research on the use of interviewing skills by frontline officers (Dalton et al., 2020) and no research assessing the value of training frontline officers in interviewing. Specifically, we argue and provide preliminary evidence here that this type of training is needed at the patrol level.

Evidence-Based Interview Practices

Evidence-based interviewing skills, often referred to as part of an investigative interviewing model, are well researched in custodial interviews, as well as with witnesses and victims (Meissner, 2021). Compared to more traditional methods (i.e., a confrontational approach) that focuses on obtaining a confession, an investigative interview approach focuses on ethics and aims to obtain accurate and reliable information from subjects (Brimbal et al., 2019b). Research shows that an investigative approach consistently increases cooperation and disclosure in both laboratory studies (Brimbal et al., 2019a; Dianiska et al., 2021; Wachi et al., 2018) and field studies (Brimbal et al., 2021; McGurk et al., 1993; Rivard et al., 2014). It also provides the benefit of decreasing the likelihood of false confession without decreasing true confession rates (Catlin et al., 2024). An investigative interviewing model involves a generally respectful approach towards the interview subject as well as the use of rapport-building skills and productive questions (Meissner et al., 2023). Rapport building is typically aimed at improving the relationship and increasing trust between a subject and their interviewer. Generally, interviewers who build rapport with subjects leave them with more positive impressions (Abbe & Brandon, 2014; Gabbert et al., 2021; Vallano & Schreiber Compo,



2015). This improved attitude also leads to a more cooperative outlook, with subjects providing better-quality information (Brimbal et al., 2021). Training in rapport building motivates officers to be more mindful of how they present themselves and how they are perceived (Brandon et al., 2018). Rapport (specifically relational rapport) can be fostered with tactics such as reciprocity to build trust (Matsumoto & Hwang, 2018; Oleszkiewicz, et al., 2024) and self-disclosures (Dianiska et al., 2021; Goodman-Delahunty et al., 2014) and identifying similarities between the interviewer and the subject to develop affiliation (Brimbal et al., 2019a). Another effective set of techniques to build rapport during a conversation (conversational rapport) by using adaptation to provide a subject autonomy and evocation and acceptance to demonstrate empathy (Alison et al., 2013; Miller & Rollnick, 2013). Use of conversational rapport increases information yield from suspects accused of terrorism (Alison et al., 2013; Christiansen et al., 2018) and reduces subjects' resistance strategies (Alison et al., 2014).

Best practices regarding productive questions include the use of open-ended queries that provide the opportunity for an unrestricted response, such as "TED" questions (Milne & Bull, 1999; Walsh & Bull, 2010) typically start with "Tell me..." "Explain..." "Describe..." These prompts are followed by more specific probing questions. The use of open-ended questions yields more information (Griffiths & Milne, 2006) and cooperation (Kelly & Valencia, 2020). In contrast, much information can be lost by asking unproductive questions (Oxburgh et al., 2010), for example closed-ended ("What color was the car?") or leading or suggestive questions ("Was the car yellow?") (Wright & Alison, 2004), as well as asking multiple questions in quick succession (Shepherd, 2007). Another key element of productive questioning is active listening (effective use of silence, reflections, and summaries) (Vecchi et al., 2005) through which the officer gives the subject a voice and displays empathy and respect—key components of procedural justice.

Interviewing to Implement Procedural Justice

The pillars of procedural justice dovetail with aspects of investigative interviewing. However, this overlap has been largely overlooked by researchers (Goodman-Delahunty et al., 2014). Indeed, interviewing strategies that employ a "humanitarian approach" (Holmberg & Madsen, 2014), such as rapport building and active listening, have shown effects on attitudinal (perceptions of rapport, trust) and behavioral (e.g., cooperation) variables that are commonly examined outcomes in procedural justice research. However, when studying interviewing, researchers often emphasize the information gained and do not measure mediational variables, such as willingness to cooperate with investigators (Brimbal et al., 2021) or public perception of interview techniques (Jones & Brimbal, 2017). Research focuses predominantly on interviews conducted in formal settings by detectives (Dalton et al., 2020). Yet, patrol officers responding to service calls often interview victims or witnesses in distress. Rapport-based information-gathering skills provide an opportunity for officers to engage the public in a procedurally just manner. Procedural justice concerns the perceived fairness of the decision-making process and treatment by authorities, including the police (Sunshine & Tyler, 2003). This sense of fairness increases when police engage in respectful, trustworthy,



unbiased two-way dialogue with the community (Tyler, 2019).

Training officers in procedural justice provides benefits to both officers by improving their attitudes toward procedural justice (Jannetta et al., 2019; McLean et al., 2020; Skogan et al., 2015) and the public by improving trust in the police (Mazerolle et al., 2012; Fontaine et al., 2019). These findings have been replicated in other contexts, including civil and criminal courts (Dollar et al., 2018; Jones et al., 2019; Somers & Holtfreter, 2018; Tyler, 2017). Notably, procedural justice training has effects beyond attitudinal changes. Training officers in procedural justice reduces use of force (Owens et al., 2018; Wood et al., 2020; McLean et al., 2020) and arrests (Owens et al., 2018; Weisburd et al., 2022) while increasing respectful and unbiased interactions with the public (Weisburd et al., 2022).

Relatedly, legitimacy—the belief that authorities, institutions, and social arrangements are appropriate, proper, and just—is often equated to the extent to which one trusts the police and feels an obligation to obey the police (Tyler, 2006; Tyler & Fagan, 2008; Tyler & Huo, 2002). Meta-analyses provide support for this process-based model of regulation: procedurally just policing increases public perceptions of police legitimacy, which in turn influences compliance (Walters & Bolger, 2019) and cooperation (Bolger & Walters, 2019). Thus, when police use rapport-based skills, witnesses and victims should feel they are treated in a procedurally just manner. As a result of this fair treatment, witnesses and victims should cooperate more by providing more and better quality information to officers.

Interviewing to Improve Investigative Outcomes

While detectives are a police forces' main investigative body, in practice, patrol officers are also key actors in investigations (Horvath et al., 2001). Moreover, the information needed to clear a crime typically originates from the public, a group most likely to interact with first responders (Chaiken et al., 1991). Therefore police patrol units should develop and maintain effective lines of communication with their communities. Patrol officers support criminal investigations in at least three different ways. First, some police agencies employ an organizational model in which investigative responsibilities interviewing victims and witnesses, collecting evidence, arresting suspects—are typically assigned to the initial responding officers. Detectives are only involved in serious and complex cases such as murders, bank robberies, and major financial fraud. Other law enforcement agencies follow more or less similar divisions of labor. Smaller police departments, for example, often lack specialized detective units, while large agencies face logistic challenges that dictate a decentralized approach with geographical command structures deploying patrol officers and detectives units who support one another.

Second, patrol officers often play a supporting role in the criminal investigation process by setting the stage for detectives' follow-up work. As the initial police units on the scene, patrol officers are the first to deal with the public, gather information, and protect evidence. Timely communication with witnesses and victims is generally preferable as delayed interviews can lead



to memories fading and/or changing, Victims may also choose not to pursue their assailant and physical evidence may be lost or contaminated. Patrol officers' ability to establish rapport, gather comprehensive information, and assist in memory recall is vital for the initial investigation and the entire process. The initial interactions among victims, witnesses, and law enforcement are critical; they can significantly influence the course of the investigation and subsequent judicial procedures.

Finally, patrol officers assist detective functions by being the department's eyes and ears. Case resolution depends on the collection of information; members of the public often help police locate witnesses, identify suspects, and search for physical evidence (Klockars & Mastrofski, 1991; Rossmo, 2021). Unlike office-bound detectives, patrol officers are on the street 24/7. They observe routines, cultivate informants, conduct field checks, and generate intelligence. Their ability to successfully interact with the community is an important and necessary skill (Leovy, 2015).

Science-based interview techniques equip first responders with the knowledge and skills to effectively establish and maintain rapport, employ appropriate questioning techniques, elicit detailed accounts, enhance memory recall, recognize signs of deception, and address resistance. The effectiveness and outcome of numerous criminal investigations hinge on initial responders' adeptness at communication, their capacity for empathy, and their ability to extract comprehensive and precise descriptions of an incident. These attributes play a crucial role in paving the way for subsequent interviews with investigators and prosecutors and in providing high-quality testimony in a legal setting.

Training Patrol Officers in Interview Skills: A Pilot

Thus, officers using evidence-based interviewing skills can provide many benefits in their interactions with the public. The College of Policing, an independent organization linked to the Home Office in the United Kingdom, has developed interviewing guidelines for frontline officers (College of Policing, 2019). Although 78% of recently surveyed officers reported receiving some sort of academy training (Brimbal et al., 2024), there is no standardized model in the United States. Here, we describe such training and explore how it was received by a sample of officers.

Method

Participants and Procedure

Our sample consisted of 26 patrol officers from a large urban police department (more than 100 patrol officers serving over one million residents) who volunteered to participate in an interview training. Participants were asked to respond to surveys about their knowledge before and after the training and answer questions about the training after completing it. Participants' responses were tracked pre/post through anonymous IDs.



Training

The two-day training was implemented by a practitioner-researcher team and included lectures, videos, and practical exercises. The program included modules on first impressions, rapport building, motivational interviewing, active listening, memory, productive questioning techniques, and resistance. It also covered the impact of first impressions, judgements about deceptiveness, and genuineness—and how these factors can affect rapport. We included information about rapport building tactics, such as appropriately using self-disclosure and similarities, expressing empathy and respect, drawing out a subject’s perspective, using silence and actively listening, and addressing resistance within a rapport-based model. We discussed issues of memory contamination, problematic questions (e.g., leading and compound questions), and the value of productive questions (open-ended, well-timed probing, and closed-ended). See Appendix A for an outline of the training.

Measures

We measured the knowledge participants gained from the training (comparing pre/post responses) and their attitudes towards the training. Knowledge was assessed with 27 items, covering first impressions (e.g., “Is lack of eye contact a good indicator that a subject is lying?”), rapport (e.g., “Which statement is true of self-disclosure?”), memory (e.g., “Which factor affects memory storage?”), questioning strategies (e.g., “What are TED questions?”), motivational interviewing (e.g., “What is acceptance in an interview?”), and active listening (e.g., “When does an interviewer use paraphrasing?”). We also asked our trainees about their perceptions of the training with both quantitative (e.g., rating the extent to which the training was useful on bipolar 4-point scales: “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”) and qualitative questions (e.g., “What was the most helpful part of the training overall?”)

Results

Although we trained 26 officers, only 23 completed the pre-questionnaire, and 20 finished the post-questionnaire. Further, only 15 participants included their anonymous ID in the post-questionnaire allowing us to compare their responses. To assess potential knowledge gain, we are reporting the descriptives and effect sizes for the total sample (Table 1) and paired samples t-tests for those who we could match data (Table 2). Officers’ knowledge performance increased for all topics, statistically significantly, except for the questioning block (see Table 1). When averaging all questions together, we found an increase in trainee knowledge post training ($t(13) = 10.17, p < 0.001, g = 2.56, 95\% \text{ CI } [1.46, 3.64]$).



TABLE 1. Descriptives for Full Sample Data

TRAINING SECTION	PRE M (SD)	POST M (SD)	HEDGE'S <i>g</i> [95% CI]
First impressions	0.45 (0.22)	0.88 (0.15)	2.21 [1.46, 2.96]
Rapport	0.42 (0.29)	0.67 (0.29)	0.85 [0.23, 1.46]
Memory	0.48 (0.21)	0.66 (0.17)	0.92 [0.30, 1.54]
Questions	0.26 (0.45)	0.50 (0.51)	0.49 [-0.11,1.09]
Motivational Interviewing	0.59 (0.20)	0.92 (0.15)	1.81 [1.11, 252]
Active listening	0.76 (0.21)	0.86 (0.13)	0.56 [-0.05, 1.16]
Total	0.53 (0.12)	0.81 (0.10)	2.48 [1.68, 3.27]

Note. Hedge's correction was used to account for our small sample size.

TABLE 2. Descriptives for Paired Samples Data

TRAINING SECTION	PRE M (SD)	POST M (SD)	TWO TAILED PAIRED SAMPLES <i>t</i> S	HEDGE'S <i>g</i>
First impressions	0.47 (0.22)	0.89 (0.13)	<i>t</i> (14) = 8.50***	2.08 [1.17, 2.96]
Rapport	0.42 (0.27)	0.69 (0.29)	<i>t</i> (14) = 5.53***	1.35 [0.65, 2.03]
Memory	0.45 (0.22)	0.64 (0.19)	<i>t</i> (14) = 4.53***	1.10 [0.47, 1.72]
Questions	0.27 (0.46)	0.47 (0.52)	<i>t</i> (14) = 1.38	0.34 [0.16, .083]
Motivational Interviewing	0.59 (0.18)	0.91 (0.17)	<i>t</i> (14) = 5.87***	1.43 [0.71, 2.13]
Active listening	0.77 (0.17)	0.89 (.13)	<i>t</i> (13) = 2.28*	0.57 [0.03, 1.10]
Total	0.53 (0.13)	0.80 (0.09)	<i>t</i>(13) = 10.17***	2.26 [1.46, 3.64]

Note. Hedge's correction was used to account for our small sample size. *** indicates significance at a *p* < 0.001 level. * indicates significance at a *p* < 0.05 level.

**TABLE 3.** Descriptives for Our Attitudes Towards the Training

QUESTION	M	SD	MIN	MAX
The training was interesting	3.80	0.41	3	4
The training was useful	3.75	0.44	3	4
The training will help me on the job	3.75	0.44	3	4
I feel prepared to use science-based interview tactics in the field	3.30	0.57	2	4

Perceptions of the training were overall positive (see Table 3) with means close to the maximum of 4 (“Strongly agree”). Trainees also provided comments in response to the open-ended questions such as “Simple techniques that can help an interview,” “It is easy to do and has a lot of benefits,” and “Good introduction to patrol level officers to enhance interviewing techniques.” These comments illustrate trainees’ belief in the training’s utility for patrol officers.

Discussion

This small pilot of a two-day training achieved gains in knowledge and positive ratings. This illustrates two points: We were able to fill previous gaps in knowledge in our participants, and, because the trainees were satisfied with the training’s content, this suggests they saw a need for this type of training. Our participants were self-selected into this training, so the sample presumably includes officers who were particularly interested in interviewing as a craft. Nonetheless, the gain in knowledge was still notable. Although tested with a small sample, the training highlights the need for more research in this area. The skills presented in this type of evidence-based interview training should directly improve officers’ interactions with community members and strengthen police-community relations. This training should also improve the quality of information gathered at the beginning of an investigation, since frontline officers are most often the public’s initial point of contact. Thus, future research should examine training patrol officers in this type of evidence-based interviewing skills on these attitudinal and behavioral outcomes. Improved information quality can contribute to case clearance rates and reduce the risk of errors in criminal investigations (Rossmo, 2021). And, if effective in practice, and widely implemented, this type of training can set the tone for frontline officers’ interactions with the public and improve perceptions of the police. Finally, this course provides a template for designing evidence-based cadet interviewing and communication training, helping fill a void in many police academies. Frontline officers trained with a foundation of evidence-based interviewing practices should be equipped to be effective interviewers and build upon these skills throughout their careers.



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Appendix A: Training Outline

Fundamentals of Investigative Interviewing

Course Goal

Students will understand and practice effective evidence-based investigative interviewing skills to use when responding to calls necessitating an interview. The course will include lectures, discussions, learning activities, videos and role play scenarios.

Learning Goals

1. Students will be familiar with factors that might affect impressions in interviews, understand the importance of impression formation and how it can affect rapport building.
2. Students will become familiar with the concept of rapport, and tools to build rapport.
3. Students will understand how to use motivational interviewing, active listening, and relational rapport building tactics to build rapport
4. Students will be familiar with how human memory works and why this knowledge is important to understand as an interviewer.
5. Students will know what are considered “good” productive questions and problematic questions.
6. Students will become familiar with the steps to gather the initial statement for an investigative interview.
7. Students will understand how to identify and mitigate resistance within a rapport-based approach to interviewing.

Learning Objectives

1. Students will be familiar with factors that might affect impressions in interviews, understand the importance of impression formation and how it can affect rapport building
 - 1.1. Students will explore factors that can affect how they are perceived by a subject of an interview, and vice versa
 - 1.2. Students will learn about the factors that influence first impressions
 - 1.3. Students will learn about confirmation bias
 - 1.4. Students will understand the role of stereotypes in impression formation
 - 1.5. Students will learn about deception, what are and aren't reliable cues, and issues that might arise when mistaken assumptions are made
 - 1.6. Students will understand how first impressions set the stage for rapport building
2. Students will be familiar with the concept of rapport, and tools to build rapport.
 - 2.1. Students will learn the different definitions of rapport



- 2.2. Students will learn why rapport building is important and how it can benefit an interview
- 2.3. Students will learn important concepts to consider when building rapport
- 2.4. Students will learn the process to successfully build rapport
3. Students will understand how to use active listening, motivational interviewing, and relational rapport building tactics
 - 3.1. Students will learn what active listening is and how it helps rapport building
 - 3.2. Students will identify and explore the different components of active listening
 - 3.3. Students will learn how to use active listening in an investigative interview
 - 3.4. Students will learn what motivational interviewing is and how it relates to rapport building
 - 3.5. Students will identify and explore the different components of motivational interviewing
 - 3.6. Students will learn how to use motivational interviewing in an investigative interview
 - 3.7. Students will identify and explore the different components of relational tactics
4. Students will be familiar with how human memory works and why this knowledge is important to understand as an interviewer
 - 4.1. Students will understand how memory plays a role in the investigative interview
 - 4.2. Students will learn about the stages of memory
 - 4.3. Students will learn about external factors that can affect memory
 - 4.4. Students will learn about how the interviewer can affect memory
 - 4.5. Students will understand how they can help mitigate memory errors
5. Students will know how to develop a productive line of questioning
 - 5.1. Students will be familiar with open-ended, appropriate closed, probing questions (i.e., “good” questions)
 - 5.2. Students will be familiar with the funnel structure of questions and understand at what point during the interview to ask these questions
 - 5.3. Students will be familiar with unproductive questions and why they might be problematic
 - 5.4. Students will know what free recall is and how to elicit it
 - 5.5. Students will understand how to incorporate active listening within a line of questioning
 - 5.6. Students will be able to identify what are considered “good” productive questions and problematic questions



6. Students will be familiar with the steps to gather the initial statement for an investigative interview
 - 6.1. Students will understand the goals of the initial statement
 - 6.2. Students will learn how to introduce the interview
 - 6.3. Students will understand how introducing the interview will help build and maintain rapport
 - 6.4. Students will understand how introducing the interview will help prevent memory errors
 - 6.5. Students will know how to proceed after obtaining the initial account

7. Students will understand how to identify and mitigate resistance within a rapport-based approach to interviewing.
 - 7.1. Students will understand the definition of resistance, resistance behaviors, and motivations behind resistance
 - 7.2. Students will explore different resistance behaviors
 - 7.3. Students will learn the different ways to address resistance within a rapport-based model
 - 7.4. Students will understand possible different motivations to resist
 - 7.5. Students will learn how identify motivations to resist within a rapport-based model
 - 7.6. Students will learn the different mitigation techniques they can use within a rapport-based model
 - 7.7. Students will learn what confrontation should look like within a rapport-based model