

Researchers call for an end to aggressive interrogations

By Douglas Quan, Canwest News Service March 30, 2010



One of the biggest advocates for the overhaul of the way police agencies in Canada train officers to interview/interrogate suspects is Detective John Tedeschini. He is advocating for an approach that is less accusatory/confrontational and more focused on gathering information in Edmonton on Monday, March 29.

Photograph by: Brian J. Gavriloff, Edmonton Journal

It might make for compelling TV, but the confrontational, in-your-face police method of interrogating suspects has got to end, say the authors of an article in the April edition of the *Canadian Journal of Criminology and Criminal Justice* which calls for sweeping reforms.

The article's authors, a mix of detectives and academics, say the traditional U.S.-based model of questioning suspects — often depicted in TV crime shows — is not backed by science, is overly coercive and can lead to false confessions and loss of public confidence.

They favour an interviewing method developed in the United Kingdom, which, they say, is less accusatory and emphasizes information gathering over getting a confession.

"We're now in the 21st century. With the psychological science out there, there's clearly a need to move forward," said Edmonton police Detective John Tedeschini, who co-wrote the article with Detective

Michael Stinson of the Greater Sudbury Police Service, Insp. John House of the Royal Newfoundland Constabulary, and Brent Snook, an associate professor of psychology at Memorial University.

The article takes aim at the Reid Technique, named after Chicago polygraph pioneer John E. Reid. The technique, which has been taught across North America, has two key components: the behavioural analysis interview and the interrogation.

The interview typically starts with basic questions that allow the investigator to get a sense of the suspect's normal behaviour, including demeanour, posture and eye contact.

The investigator is then taught to ask "behaviour provoking" questions (What was your first reaction when you found out that the money was missing? How do you feel toward the person who stole the money?) and "investigative questions" that allow the detective to assess whether the suspect had the opportunity to commit the crime (Did you have access to the money? Do you know anyone else who had access to the money?).

Deviations from the suspect's normal behaviour — in his body language or in the way he answers questions — could indicate deception, according to this technique.

If the investigator believes the suspect is guilty after the interview, an interrogation usually follows. It is more accusatory in tone and the investigator does most of the talking.

During the interrogation, the investigator might offer a moral justification for the crime. In a workplace-theft scenario, for instance, the investigator might tell the suspect: "I am convinced that what you did here was out of character, and I believe it happened because of the strain all of us are under to pay our bills."

The investigator might also present two choices for what happened — both being incriminating. "Did you plan this thing out or did it just happen on the spur of the moment?" the investigator might ask.

The journal article's authors are critical of both the interview and the interrogation methods. They say research has shown that police cannot be trained to reliably detect deception, and that officers are more likely to be biased toward guilt.

They say the interrogation methods "create a sense of psychological pressure that persuades people, both innocent and guilty, to provide information that they normally would not give freely."

"It's psychologically manipulative, it's controlling," Tedeschini said. "Optically it doesn't look good."

Tedeschini and the others say they prefer the PEACE method of interviewing, which has been adopted in the U.K., Norway and New Zealand, and focuses more on getting the suspect to talk.

The interview typically begins with an open-ended question that allows the suspect to give an account of what he was doing and where he was.

The investigator might follow up by probing details of that account. If the suspect, for instance, says he was at a restaurant at the time a crime was committed, the investigator might ask the suspect to describe features of the restaurant, or whether he has a receipt.

If there's a discrepancy between the suspect's account and other evidence, the investigator might challenge the suspect but never in an aggressive or accusatory way.

"You're not worried about tricking anyone. It takes a lot of stress off the interviewer. Mind you, they still have to be on the ball and listen intently," Stinson said.

Joseph Buckley is president of John E. Reid and Associates, which trains more than 20,000 people across Canada and the U.S. each year in interviewing and interrogation methods. He said in an interview that the PEACE technique is too limiting and that there are times when an investigator needs

to use more persuasive tactics, such as when there is a lack of forensic evidence or witnesses.

"It will diminish the number of cases that they (police) resolve," he said of the PEACE model.

Buckley said critics who deride his company's interviewing methods are relying on laboratory studies that have failed to replicate those methods.

Buckley said his training program warns investigators against making threats or promises, and that the methods taught by his company have been backed by courts in Canada and the U.S.

"We're not trying to create a hopeless situation. We're trying to persuade them to be honest about what they did," Buckley said.

According to the journal article, most police departments in Canada utilize the Reid approach or a derivative of it.

But some changes have begun.

At the Canadian Police College, which offers the largest forensic interview-training program, students are taught a combination of the Reid and PEACE techniques, said Staff Sgt. Scott McLeod.

In Edmonton, Tedeschini said, there is less emphasis on behaviour analysis — trying to be a human lie detector — and a confession-at-all-costs mentality is discouraged.

The provincial police force in Newfoundland has almost completed training all of its criminal investigators in the PEACE model and will soon start training its frontline officers, said Insp. John House.

"They feel much more confident in the quality of the work they're doing. They're more organized," House said. "They wish they had gotten this training when they first started off."

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