

Police Witness Interview Training, Supervision, and Feedback: A Survey of Canadian Police Officers¹

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Malgré l'importance reconnue de la formation intensive de policiers intervieweurs efficaces et d'une supervision et d'un feedback soutenus afin de maintenir les compétences acquises en techniques d'entrevue, il n'existe aucune donnée empirique sur l'état actuel de telles pratiques dans les services canadiens de police. Les policiers canadiens (N = 171) de deux organismes ont rempli en ligne un questionnaire sur la formation, la supervision, et le feedback reçu après une entrevue avec des témoins adultes. Des policiers ont indiqué que leur formation était limitée et qu'elle avait été obtenue de sources disparates, et plusieurs ont déclaré qu'ils n'étaient pas satisfaits de la formation en entrevue qu'ils avaient reçue. La plupart des policiers ont aussi indiqué qu'il avaient rarement fait l'objet de supervision, ni reçu de feedback de leurs superviseurs en ce qui avait trait à leurs entrevues ou encore suivi des cours de recyclage pour les aider à maintenir leurs compétences. Nous discutons des répercussions de ces résultats sur les pratiques d'entrevue des policiers et de l'utilisation possible de ces résultats pour améliorer au Canada les pratiques actuelles d'entrevue avec les témoins.

Mots clés : entrevues avec les témoins, maintien de l'ordre, formation et feedback, questionnaire d'auto-évaluation

Despite the recognized importance of intensive training for producing effective police interviewers and the importance of sustained supervision and feedback in maintaining learned interviewing skills, there is no empirical data on the current state of such practices in Canadian police organizations. Canadian police officers (N = 171) from two organizations completed an online survey about the training, supervision, and feedback received for interviewing adult witnesses. Officers reported that their training was limited and came from

several disparate sources, and many officers expressed a lack of satisfaction with the interview training that they had received. The majority of officers also indicated that it was rare for them to receive supervision or feedback from their supervisors on their interviews or refresher training to help them maintain their skills. The implications of these findings for police interviewing practices and the potential to use these results to improve current witness interviewing practices in Canada are discussed.

Keywords: witness interviewing, policing, training and feedback, self-report survey

Two recent field studies on how Canadian police officers interview witnesses suggest that most interviewers are not employing best practices (Snook and Keating 2010; Wright and Alison 2004). Possible reasons for such a finding pertain to the fact that training being provided to officers on evidence-based practices is limited and there is a lack of sustained supervision and feedback for interviewers who *are* trained (see Clarke and Milne 2001; Lamb, Hershkowitz, Orbach, and Esplin 2008; Snook, Eastwood, Stinson, Tedeschini, and House 2010). However, these explanations for the observed inadequacies in interviewing practices remain speculative, as no research has explored the training or the supervision and feedback afforded Canadian officers. The purpose of the current study was to learn more about adult-witness interviewing practices in Canada by surveying Canadian police officers.

As mentioned, the results from two field studies of Canadian police officers suggest that empirically based interviewing practices are rarely being followed. Specifically, Wright and Alison's (2004) analysis of 19 adult witness interviews showed that interviewers often violated the recommended *80-20 talking rule* (i.e., they spoke, on average, 30% of the time) and interrupted witnesses frequently. They also found that interviewers asked much fewer open-ended than closed-end questions. Similarly, Snook and Keating's (2010) analysis of 90 adult witness interviews found that interviewers rarely asked appropriate types of question (e.g., 6% of all questions were classified as open-ended) and tended to use inappropriate types of question (e.g., 35% of all question were classified as closed-ended). Also of concern is the finding that officers violated the *80-20 talking rule* in almost 90% of interviews by talking on average 36% of the time. In addition to empirical data, formal inquiries into miscarriages of justice in Canada have also identified the inappropriate interviewing of witnesses as a major concern (see Lamer 2006 for concerns about the effect of inadequate interviewing on criminal investigative failures). It should be noted that problems

with witness interviewing are not unique to Canada, as substandard interviewing practices have been observed in other countries (e.g., Fisher and Geiselman 1992; Milne and Bull 1999; Williamson, Milne, and Savage 2009).

The poor interviewing practices are possibly due to a lack of training, supervision, and feedback for police interviewers. Research shows that police organizations must implement comprehensive training on fundamental interviewing best practices if they wish to develop effective interviewers. Just as importantly, supervision and feedback from trained supervisors is required if new interviewing skills are to be maintained (Broad 1997; Lamb Sternberg, Orbach, Hershkowitz, Horowitz, and Esplin 2000). For example, a study by Clarke and Milne (2001) showed that police organizations that had a supervision policy and provided regular supervision were more likely to have their officers' exhibit proper interviewing skills long after training sessions had ended. However, the best indication we have, which is unfortunately based on anecdotal evidence (i.e., personal communications with police officers), is that interview training for *most* Canadian police officers is cursory and non-systematic (Snook, Eastwood, Stinson et al. 2010a). Furthermore, systematic evaluation and feedback regarding post-training interviews does not appear to be regular practice within most Canadian police organizations (Snook, Eastwood, Stinson et al. 2010a).

The purpose of the current study was to learn more about police interviewing practices in Canada by surveying officers about their witness interview training, supervision, and feedback experiences; the first attempt of its kind in Canada. The results of the survey will help map the current state of police witness interviewing training and supervision in Canada and identify areas for improvement.

Method

Participants

Police officers ($N = 171$) from two Canadian police organizations (one from eastern and one from western Canada) completed the online survey. The response rate for the eastern organization was 12%, and for the western organization was 9%. Of the 164 officers that indicated their gender, 118 were men and 46 were women. The average age of participants was 39.72 years ($SD = 7.49$, Range: 23–55; $N = 165$).

Of the 164 officers who self-reported their rank and/or designation, 108 were constables, 10 detectives, 25 sergeants, 16 detective/constables, and 5 inspectors. The mean number of years of working as a police officer was 13.62 ($SD = 8.38$, Range: 1-31, $N = 164$). The officers indicated that approximately 20% of their total work time was spent interviewing witnesses ($N = 151$, $M = 22.07\%$, $SD = 21.54$, Range: 0-90). All but 1 of the 165 officers (99.39%) who responded indicated that they had interviewed witnesses, 93 of 163 (57.06%) reported that they had been trained to use the cognitive interview, and 82 of 152 (53.95%) reported that they used the cognitive interview (for more on the cognitive interview, see Milne and Bull 1999).

The survey

Each officer from the two organizations was sent an e-mail regarding the location and purpose of the online survey. Participating officers were first asked to submit their e-mail address to receive a unique password and that password was subsequently separated from their e-mail address to make the procedure anonymous. Once participants gained access to the survey, they were asked to read an informed consent form. After agreeing to participate, each officer was then presented with each of the three sections consecutively.

In the first section, participants were asked the following three open-ended questions:

1. In the space provided, please describe your witness interview training.
2. In the space provided, please describe the supervision of your witness interviews.
3. In the space provided, please describe the feedback that you receive on your witness interviews.

Responses to open-ended questions were coded by an independent researcher using an iterative process.²

In the second section, participants were asked to rate their level of agreement on nine statements pertaining to their witness interviewing training, supervision, and feedback (1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*; see Table 1 for complete list of questions). The final section of the survey contained eight demographic questions (see participant description above).

Table 1: Self-reported level of agreement regarding interviewing training and supervision and feedback practices

Interviewing Issue	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>Mdn</i>	<i>% Strongly Disagree</i>	<i>% Disagree</i>	<i>% Agree</i>	<i>% Strongly Agree</i>
1. My interviews are supervised	1.94 (0.90)	2.00	35%	45%	5%	1%
2. I receive feedback on my interviews	2.44 (1.13)	2.00	22%	38%	21%	2%
3. I have the opportunity to receive refresher training	2.60 (1.09)	2.00	16%	38%	25%	2%
4. My interviewing approach is based on psychological science	2.74 (1.06)	3.00	15%	25%	22%	3%
5. I am well trained on how to interview	3.09 (1.04)	3.00	6%	26%	35%	6%
6. The quality of my interview training was excellent	3.15 (0.99)	3.00	5%	23%	38%	5%
7. I am satisfied with my interview training	3.19 (1.06)	3.00	6%	22%	38%	8%
8. My interviews are consistent with how other officers' conduct their interviews	3.33 (0.90)	3.00	5%	10%	43%	5%
9. I know how to conduct a professional interview	3.49 (0.99)	4.00	5%	11%	50%	10%

Results

Open-ended questions

Of the 170 participants who responded to the witness-interviewing training question, the most common response was that they received their training in the field (27%); that is, on the job.³ A further 23% indicated that their training was provided at the police academy, and 24% indicated that they received training on (unspecified) courses. Thus, fewer than half had received formal training.

Nearly 46% of participants (out of the 161 who responded) indicated that they did not receive any supervision on their interviews, 23% indicated minimal supervision, and 24% indicated that supervision was done by their peers. Approximately 3% indicated that their inter-

views were always supervised and 2% indicated that they received supervision upon request.

Approximately 34% of participants (out of the 161 who responded) indicated that they did not receive any feedback on their interviews, with 24% indicating that feedback was minimal and 11% indicating that they got feedback from peers. Fewer than 5% of participants indicated that the feedback was immediate and thorough. Approximately 24% indicated that the feedback they received was constructive and positive.

Direct questions

Table 1 contains the responses to the direct questions pertaining to the officers' interview training, supervision, and feedback practices. For the purpose of presenting the results succinctly in the text, participants who endorsed either of the *agree* options (i.e., *strongly agree* or *agree*) were considered to have agreed with the statement and their corresponding percentages were combined. The same was done for the two *disagree* (i.e., *strongly disagree* or *disagree*) options.

The results suggest that the officers expressed some concern over the supervision of their interviews. Specifically, 6% of respondents agreed that their interviews were supervised and 23% agreed that they tended to receive feedback on their interviews. Concerns were also raised regarding the current state of interview training, as fewer than half of officers agreed that their interviewing approach was based on psychological science, they were well trained to conduct interviews, they received excellent training, and they were satisfied with their training. Furthermore, only 27% of officers claimed that they got the opportunity to receive refresher training. Nearly half of the interviewers agreed that their interviews were consistent with how other officers interviewed witnesses. Despite some concerns they had about their interviewing supervision and feedback, 60% of officers believed that they knew how to conduct a professional interview.

Discussion

The purpose of the current research was to contribute to the knowledge about witness interviewing practices in Canada. The police officers in the current study reported low levels of training and a lack of satisfaction with their current interview training. Officers also reported that

supervision of, and feedback on, their witness interviews was infrequent. Bearing in mind the limitations associated with survey research, our results suggest that Canadian police organizations should provide training that is embedded in science and offer the feedback and supervision that are required to ensure that proper interviewing skills are learned and maintained.

The findings from the current survey support the arguments from an earlier commentary in this journal that current interview training in Canada is inadequate to ensure interviewing best practices are being followed (Snook, Eastwood, Stinson et al. 2010a). Although almost 90% of officers reported receiving some type of training, the type of training was quite disparate in nature, ranging from on-the-job training to police academy training to courses run by the Canadian Police College. In addition, only about one quarter of officers reported that they had had an opportunity to receive refresher training. When asked about their opinion of the training they had received, approximately two fifths of officers were satisfied with the quality of their training and considered themselves well trained on how to conduct an interview. Because investigative interviewing is such a fundamental component of police work, the lack of reported satisfaction with training and the variable nature of the training is a cause for concern, especially since training is arguably the first step in creating an effective interviewer. As a potential solution, the implementation of a comprehensive, tier-based system of witness interview training that is grounded in scientific research (based on the PEACE model of interviewing [Milne and Bull 1999]) would go some way to rectifying this concern (see Snook, Eastwood, Stinson et al. 2010a; Snook, Eastwood, House et al. 2010b).

With regards to supervision and feedback, 6% of officers reported that their interviews were supervised and only one quarter indicated that they actually received feedback on their interviews. The importance of feedback for investigative interviewing is illustrated most clearly in a large body of research on interviewing children by Lamb et al. (2008), and other researchers around the world who have consistently found that training is not in itself enough to ensure that the required skills are exhibited in actual interviews (Bull 2010). Specifically, continued support, guidance, and feedback are required to maintain the ability to deploy the components of effective interviewing (see Powell, Wright, and Clark 2010 for some specific recommendations). Moreover, Lamb et al.'s (2008) research has shown that the termination of

feedback can result in a dramatic decline in skills. The importance of feedback was also demonstrated in Clarke and Milne's (2001) field study of British interviewers, where it was found that organizations providing feedback and supervision produced better interviews than those that did not provide such quality control. To ensure long term skilful interviewing, police organizations in Canada should put more emphasis on ensuring that comprehensive and structured feedback is provided to interviewers. Again, such procedures could be modelled around the supervisory tools that accompany the PEACE model of interviewing (see Clarke and Milne 2001).

We recognize that the current survey assessed beliefs within only two police organizations, which may limit the generalizability of the current results to all Canadian police organizations. The relatively low response rate from those organizations, although typical of what is found in survey research of this nature, may also limit generalizability. We also acknowledge that some of our questions were broad in scope, which restricted the level of detail that could be obtained from the officers. While the results of our brief survey offer insights, a more extensive examination of interviewing practices and procedures is encouraged.

We cannot emphasize enough the need for all Canadian police organizations to implement comprehensive training procedures and subsequent continuous supervision and structured feedback (see Freedman 1988 for similar arguments). We realize that implementation of such an intensive training initiative will take a substantial amount of resources and determination from all levels of an organization, but it is crucial if police organizations in Canada are committed to producing long-term improvements in the investigative interviewing of witnesses and victims.

Notes

- 1 We would like to thank Avery Earle for creating the online survey and Kellie Lynch and Kirk Luther for their assistance with data entry and coding.
- 2 Please note that multiple responses could be given by a participant; thus, the total percentage could exceed 100%.
- 3 A between-organizations comparison was conducted for each of the questionnaire items. No significant differences in average responses were found; thus, results are reported across the two organizations.

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