



I&RC Newsletter

Get it right, first time and every time

April 2026

Welcome to this month's edition of our newsletter where we continue our journey to improve investigative interviewing from criminal and non-criminal perspectives and investigative safeguarding, trying to create a real learning environment for us and everyone involved in these vital fields.

In this month's edition, we have a short read on the relevance of questions during your investigative interview, our regular top tip and an important date for your diary.

We hope you enjoy this edition.

Relevance of Questions – Evaluating the Information Obtained

It is widely acknowledged and accepted that open ended questions during the investigative interview is the best way to elicit the most accurate information from an interviewee. The PEACE model of investigative interviewing adopted in the UK and around the globe allows for significant opportunities to ask open ended questions to achieve the best evidence or information. Questions which are commonly known as TED questions.

“Tell me about the car”

“Explain that to me, a little more”

“Describe the driver for me”.

As recent as this week, Morgan McSweeney was giving evidence at the Foreign Affairs Committee regarding Peter Mandelson's role as British Ambassador to the USA. Amongst the myriads of questions thrown at McSweeney, was a query from one MP, asking if Mandelson's vetting procedure had offered Mandelson enough 'open' questions to respond sufficiently to ensure the procedure was adequate. The presumption being that maybe there is some suggestion he was not, thus demonstrating the importance of open-ended questions.

There is a wealth of available literature that demonstrates the effectiveness of 'good' open questions, however, there appears to be less research around the subject matter of that 'good' open question, in other words, what bearing does that question have on the matter being investigated and does that question contribute to the evidence or information required for key decision making.

The UK College of Policing states, ***“Officers and staff should allow the witness to give an account in their own words, using open questions where possible, to obtain sufficient reliable information to determine next steps”*** (COP, 2020).

Although this method of questioning was developed primarily for law enforcement following wrongful convictions of three vulnerable males in the early 1970's, it is now a style of questioning that is widely used in investigative contexts by organisations which are not per se, connected to policing as such. Bodies such as health and safety, sports safeguarding, social work and much more.

Whilst many investigators conduct exceptional interviews, weaving their way with flexibility through the PEACE model of interviewing, eliciting fantastic evidential information by building rapport, asking open ended and probing questions, seeking clarification and challenging discrepancies where necessary, and sticking to “Achieving Best Evidence” rules, there is often, a lack of evaluation of the investigative interview.

This is from a self-evaluation perspective and a line manager perspective. The lack of evaluation (the 'E' at the end of PEACE) prevents identifying errors or problems in the interview, reduces further planning opportunities for further connected interviews and significantly hampers continuous learning.

So, whilst it is generally accepted that appropriate or best practice questions (TED,



probing, encouragers etc) generate more accurate information, that is information required key for further decision making, the question that should be posed in the context of appropriate questioning style, is, what was the relevance of that question?

An open-ended question can often elicit a wealth of information which then leads to the interviewer probing that information. If that open-ended question is irrelevant, then the interviewer can easily find themselves probing a vast amount of worthless information which may not result in any final decision-making process. In criminal cases, where there is a trial before a jury, it is accepted and common practice for lawyers to edit irrelevant questions from transcripts or video recorded interviews. Juries do not need to know irrelevant facts nor do prosecutors want to tire or confuse them by watching recorded interviews which are full of information not required to make a decision.

In criminal cases of child sexual abuse, especially when the child is very young, it is vital that the objectives of the interview are met as soon as possible. Young children

tire easily and providing accounts of what has occurred is not only a daunting process for them to discuss but is also mentally exhausting for them to recall an event or events that have occurred. Following your engagement and explanations with the interviewee, the task is to find out what occurred quickly but not rushed. There is no time to squander opportunities by discussing topics which are irrelevant. Children often go off on a tangent, and the key is to keep them on track by guiding them back to the objectives.

In every investigative interview, there will be questions which are not relevant – we are human beings not AI robots, it is part of rapport building, however, it is vital that interviewers do not waste time on topics that have no bearing on the final outcome. Take a couple of these short simple examples:

If someone makes a complaint of a domestic assault in the matrimonial home, the victim having been married to the perpetrator for twenty years and the police have the perpetrator in custody, is a description of the assailant relevant?

Tell me what he looks like, is a good open-ended question however, irrelevant to the matter.

Describe the layout of your home please – great **if** you need to know that, however, it is very unlikely, based on the short hypothetical scenario above.

Where a child is a member of a gymnastics club and informs a welfare officer, she was physically handled too rough by a coach causing an injury – does the safeguarding investigator need to know what the child pays in membership fees?

A doctor does not ask about your home life when you complain of pain in your knee.

It is vital that an interviewer focusses on the core objectives of the interview. In the case of the young gymnast, the core objectives of the interview are simply to establish facts, such as, what has happened, when it happened, who was the coach and what is the result of the incident. Detracting from the objectives wastes time and tires the interviewee, creates speculation and opinions, provides for unnecessary detail (potentially private information) and can undermine the credibility or character of an individual, plus many more problems that now mask or detract from the matter of concern.

The College of Policing in the UK, provides guidance for investigative interviews with specific advice regarding the free recall stage; the stage when the interviewee can provide a free narrative regarding the matter of concern. In their advice, they advise that the witness (in this case the interviewee) should be asked to provide an **“account of the relevant event(s) in their own words”** (COP, 2020). Interviewers cannot control what an interviewee will say however, the interviewer can control what is asked. When the interviewee goes off on a tangent, whether intentional (to divert

from the real matter of concern) or unintentional, it is vital the interviewer does not get sucked into the vacuum of irrelevant issues that will not have any bearing on the outcome of the investigation.

Over the years some investigative interviews have become scripted, and some are pre-printed questionnaires. This creates a lack of critical thinking and a blasé attitude the interview itself. Reading question after question regardless of its relevance. Accepting any answer that is given to a question regardless of what it is and then going on to probe that irrelevant information.

Preventing Irrelevance

Planning and preparation is key to ensure your investigative interview is on track with



the objectives of the interview. Try not to script every question, but rather, have topic areas which require discussion. Unless you are a lone private investigation consultant, the likelihood is you will have a line manager who should have a grasp of the case and should know the areas which need explored. Discuss your interview plan with your line manager to make sure your questions are relevant.

Evaluating your interview after completion will help you reflect on the questions you asked and how your interviewee responded. This will identify any irrelevant questions and provide for further interview planning and continuous learning. Investigative interviewing is not easy; it takes practice and more practice along with self-evaluation and line manager evaluation.

Hopefully this has provided some thoughts on your future investigative interviews.

For bespoke workshops and training on investigative interviewing get in touch with us here:

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Check out our two exclusive Workshops on May 27th and May 28th regarding vulnerability within the criminal justice system and investigative interviewing of those with mental health issues:

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Top Tip for your Investigative Interview

Do not be afraid to chat to your interviewee before you press start on the recording machine, this is building rapport. As long as you do not ask questions about the subject matter of the interview. Spend some short time getting to know them!

As always, any feedback to us would be great and if you wish to subscribe get in touch here:

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Thank you and we hope you enjoyed this edition
Keith and Laura.

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