

Full title: Police officers' use of emotional language during child sexual abuse investigations

Short title: Police officers' use of emotional language

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Abstract

This paper examined the use of emotional language by police officers who interview child victims and offenders during sexual offences investigations. It was hypothesised that officers who interviewed child victims prior to questioning the alleged offender would use more emotional utterances during offender interviews, than those who had not interviewed child victims. In addition, it was also hypothesised that the number of emotional utterances used would vary as a function of the gender of the interviewer and the type of offence (e.g. intra or extrafamilial abuse). Thirty-four interview transcripts of investigative interviews with alleged sex offenders were analysed and, contrary to the hypothesis, the results revealed a significant effect of prior acquaintance with the victim in that a greater number of negative emotional utterances (e.g. *contempt*, *disgust* and *anger*) were used by interviewers who had not previously interviewed the victim. There were no significant effects with regard to gender of the interviewer or the type of offence (e.g. extra, or intrafamilial abuse) and the study found that, despite recent recommendations, the majority of police officers had not received specialist investigative interviewing, specific to sex offenders.

Introduction

Sexual offending has often been considered a 'unique' form of offending (Abel *et al*, 1984; Marshall, 2001) and continually attracts intense scrutiny from the media. Police forces frequently come under considerable public scrutiny and pressure to apprehend child sex offenders and these often become high profile investigations (e.g. Holly Wells & Jessica Chapman and the Sarah Payne murders). This is not a new phenomenon. A particular hostility has often been directed at child sex offenders and there is no doubt that this cohort has become somewhat hated by contemporary societies (Thomas, 2000).

Child Abuse Investigations

In recent years, the law in relation to child abuse investigations has changed dramatically in England and Wales, with a greater emphasis now being placed on the specialist training of police officers in the interviewing of child victims. Two major inquiries (e.g.. The Pigot Report, 1989 and The Clyde Report, 1992) influenced changes in law (Criminal Justice Act 1991 and Youth Justice & Criminal Evidence Act 1999) that in turn underpinned the interview guidelines; the Memorandum of Good Practice (MOGP; Home Office and Department of Health, 1992) and Achieving Best Evidence (ABE; Home Office, 2002). The changes resulted in interviews with children being video-recorded, with the resultant video evidence being accepted by the courts as *evidence-in-chief*. To facilitate vulnerable

witnesses giving a clear and accurate account of events, the focus on enhancing police officers' interviewing skills continues.

The improvement over the last twenty-five years in guidance, training and the resulting skills of police officers in the investigative interviewing of suspects should be commended, and findings from psychological research have doubtless informed some of these changes (HMSO, 1981; HMSO, 1993). However, although the basic investigative interviewing training has been successful for the interviewing of suspects in general (HMSO, 2001; Milne & Bull, 1999; Shepherd & Milne, 1999; Shepherd, Mortimer, Turner & Watson, 1999; Kebbel, Milne & Wagstaff, 1999), there has been no specific focus on the investigative interviewing of sex offenders, despite the high numbers of sex crimes (HMSO, 2003) and that these crimes are seen as a 'unique' form of offending (Abel *et al*, 1984; Marshall, 2001). In addition, there is no research examining the possible emotional effects on police officers who are involved in investigating such crimes and what impact, if any, this has on subsequent investigative interviews of alleged offenders.

Ekman (2003) was influential in the formulation of the Analytical Interviewing Programme (AIP) (Analytic Interviewing, 2000), used by some Australian and US Police/Law Enforcement Agencies. He argued that there are seven basic emotions: *sadness*, *anger*, *disgust*, *contempt* and *fear* (classified as 'negative' emotions), with *surprise* and *happiness* classified as 'positive'. He argued that the voice is an emotional signal system, which is intermittent and can be turned off completely at will. However, whilst a person is acting in

an emotional way, a person might not want to suppress their emotions, rather, they want to complete what they have said, regardless of the consequences. Additionally, the emotional signals that are given off from another person often determines what is said back in reply (Gettman, Ranelli & Reid, 1996). In other words, another person's comments, looks or facial expressions, trigger one's own emotional responses, which is known as the *Person-Situation Context* (Hargie & Tourish, 1999).

Past Experiences of Police Officers and the Personal-Professional Dialectic

Holmberg, Christianson and Karlsson (in press), argued that dealing with emotional and traumatizing crime, such as sexual offending, can deeply affect an individual's physical and psychological well being and may have long-lasting consequences for individuals. Bruner and Postman (1949) argued that personal attitudes, expectations and pre-conceived ideas towards sex offenders and the victims of such crimes can influence an individual's professional attitude – the personal-professional dialectic – and therefore negatively affect the quality and efficacy of any particular intervention; in this case, a police interview (Hogue, 1993).

Police officers of either gender are expected to maintain impartiality, and their authority and effectiveness would, arguably, be compromised if they were unable to maintain and control their emotions (Pogrebin & Poole, 1991). When dealing with serious and sometimes abhorrent crimes, officers must endeavour to ensure that they distance themselves from

intense emotional reactions (Pogrebin & Poole, 1991). Furthermore, it has been suggested by Pogrebin and Poole (1991), that as a result of the uncompromising standards police officers set themselves, they learn that emotions such as *anger*, *disgust* and *sadness* should not be displayed at any cost during an interview.

However, when police officers interview victims of sexual crimes, it requires them to make sense of very powerful, personal and painful emotions and anecdotal evidence from police officers who regularly interview child sex offenders suggest that these emotions are stronger in cases of intrafamilial abuse. Saakvitne and Pearlman (1996) argue that by making sense of other people's emotions, can result in *vicarious traumatisation*, in that anyone who engages empathically with such victims can be affected by this trauma by virtue of listening to their experiences (Lea, Auburn & Kibblewhite, 1999). Furthermore, some believe (Holmberg *et al.*, in press) that the *vicarious traumatisation* resulting from interviewing a victim may carry over into the interview with the alleged offender, preventing the officer from conducting that interview in an impartial manner. As a consequence, we predicted that officers who had previously interviewed child victims of abuse would use more emotional utterances than those who had not. Furthermore, we predicted that more emotional utterances would be made by officers when they were interviewing suspects of intrafamilial, compared to extrafamilial, abuse.

Gender Differences Amongst Interviewing Police Officers

Milne and Bull (1999), argue that there are no gender effects affecting the quality of investigative interviewing, however, Gettman, Ranelli and Reid (1996), argued that gender plays an enormous role in shaping an individual's behaviour and in determining how others are responded to. In a study of medication-history interviewing, they found that male and female pharmacists differed in their use of expressive, interactive and interrogative skills, and that success of the interview depended upon the use of different sets of skills during same-sex and opposite-sex dyads. Brody (1996) argued that adult females are more facially and verbally expressive and more accurate at recognizing emotional facial expressions than their male counterparts. Strongman (2003) reported the stereotypical belief that women are more emotional, expressing *sadness* and *fear* more than males, who tend to express *anger* more often than women. If this were the case, the use of emotional language by female interviewers in the present study should be greater than by male interviewers.

Due to the lack of research into the verbal communication of emotions, especially within a police interview context, together with the anecdotal evidence from police officers who regularly interview sex offenders, the current research aims to study the prevalence of emotionality based on the use of emotional utterances by police officers who conduct investigative interviews with suspects of child sexual abuse. Specific hypotheses are: (1) officers who interview child victims prior to questioning the alleged offender will use more

emotional utterances during offender interviews than those who had not interviewed child victims; (2) the number of emotional utterances used by the interviewing officer will vary as a function of the gender of the interviewer, and (3) the number of emotional utterances used by the interviewing officer will vary as a function of the type of offence (e.g. intra or extrafamilial abuse) In addition, this research will attempt to examine the prevalence of formal training in specialist investigative interviewing techniques, specific to sex offenders.

Method

Design

The research was based on information obtained via transcripts (N = 34) from police interviews of alleged child sex offenders, and employed a 2 (Interviewed Victim Previously: *Yes, No*) x 2 (Gender of Investigator: *Male, Female*) x 2 (Abuse Type: *Intra, Extrafamilial*) between subjects design. The dependant variable was the number of emotional utterances made by the investigating officer during the interview.

Participants

Home Department Police Forces in England & Wales and the Service Police (N = 45), were requested to assist. A total of 56% of forces (n = 25) replied, from which 20% responded positively (n = 5), allowing the researcher access to appropriate transcripts

of tape-recorded interviews. A further 20% of forces (n = 5) provided detailed information of force policies relating to child sexual abuse investigations; 36% (n = 9) refused to assist in any way, and 24% of forces (n = 6) stated that a member of staff would respond, but never did.

Case Investigation and Transcript Selection

The selection of transcripts was made according to the following criteria: (1) all interviews had to be concerning child sexual abuse (not historical abuse) and, (2) officers who carried out the interviews, had to be child protection trained and regularly employed on investigations that involved child sexual abuse and the interviewing of alleged child sex offenders. Each force was requested to provide details of specialist training (if any) in specialist investigative interviewing of sex offenders and to also provide written information regarding the interviewing officers, including: (i) training received; (ii) their gender; (iii) their length of service; and (iv) whether the interviewing officer had previously interviewed the victim. In total, thirty-four transcripts were analysed, however, three transcripts were excluded from the analysis because the allegations concerned both intra-, and extra-familial abuse. Excluding these three cases left a total of 31 transcripts, consisting of fifteen interviews in which the interviewer had previously interviewed the child victim, and sixteen in which they had not. In 20 cases, the interviewing officer was female and in 11 cases the interviewing officer was male. In addition, 18 of the cases referred to extra-familial abuse and 13 referred to intra-familial abuse.

Content Analysis of Transcripts and Scoring of Emotional Words

Each transcript and accompanying information sheet was marked with the same number and then separated, with the researcher being left with only the transcripts. This was to ensure that the researcher had no information relating to the offence type and condition to which the transcript related. Only on completion of the content analysis was the researcher given the information sheets to view with the corresponding transcripts.

A content analysis was carried out for each transcript to identify emotional utterances that could be scored appropriately in accordance with Ekman's (2003) emotion states.

However, only those words/phrases uttered by the main interviewer were included in the analysis; no phrases or words uttered by the second interviewer were included. This was to avoid confusion due to some interviewers in the same interview team having received different levels of interview training. All information from the content analysis was recorded, including to which condition the transcript referred; transcript length; details of any emotional utterances; tape number (if more than one tape was used during interview); gender of interviewer(s) and offence type (intra-, or extra-familial)¹. Where transcripts were provided that contained more than one interview of the offender, but with different officers, these transcripts were split and considered as different interviews.

¹ As already noted, three of the transcripts referred to cases in which both intra-, and extra familial abuse was alleged, however, given the small number of these cases, they were excluded from the analyses.

--- insert table 1 about here ---

Exemplars of the type of emotional phrases/words found, together with category totals, are contained in Table 1. These totals exclude the emotional utterances contained in the three transcripts that were excluded from the analyses in which both intra-, and extrafamilial abuse was alleged (total utterances excluded are in parentheses). In addition, no utterances were found that could be categorised as either *sadness* or *fear* and in only one case was an utterance of *happiness* coded, therefore, this utterances was excluded from further analysis. Furthermore, it was decided that only ‘negative’ emotional utterances should be included in the analysis, thus the category of *surprise* was also excluded. Inter-rater reliability checks were carried out, which resulted in a 90% agreement between the two coders.

Results

The aims of this study were to establish whether police officers’ use of emotional utterances during an interview with an alleged child sex offender were a function of (i) whether the officer had previously interviewed the child victim; (ii) whether the officer was male or female and; (iii) the type of offence committed (e.g. intra-, or extra-familial). In addition, the extent of specialist training that officers received in this area was also examined. The means of negative emotional utterances used are presented in Table 2 and as shown, few emotional utterances were made across the offender interviews. Therefore, the negative

emotional utterances were summed to produce a total Negative Emotion Score (NES) and three *t*-tests were conducted.

As shown in Table 2, the total NES for those officers who had interviewed the child victim *prior* to interviewing the alleged offender were compared to the total NES for those officers who had *not* previously interviewed the child victim. There was a significant effect in the opposite direction to the prediction ($t(29) = -2.323, p < .05$), indicating that where officers had *not* previously interviewed the child victim, the total NES was significantly greater than those who had previously interviewed the victim. As shown in Table 2, there were no significant effects on NES as a function of either the gender of the officer ($t(29) = -.788, p > .05$), or the type of abuse ($t(29) = -.832, p > .05$)².

--- insert table 2 about here ---

Force Policies and the Extent of Specialist Sex Offender Training

From the ten police forces that responded positively, 70% (n = 7) stated that all victim and offender interviews relating to intrafamilial abuse were carried out by Child/Family Protection Unit (C/FPU) teams (but not specially trained in relation to sex offenders). Most stated that in cases involving extrafamilial abuse, an operational detective, not employed

²In order to control for the possible confounding effect of interview length, an Index of Observed Emotionality (IOE) variable was calculated by dividing the total amount of emotional utterances made by the interviewer in each transcript, by

with a C/FPU, but trained in interviewing children (e.g. has received MOGP and/or ABE training), would interview the child victim and would occasionally interview the offender. However, most forces stated that this was very *ad hoc*, with no specific policy in place. The remaining 30% of forces who responded positively (n =3) stated that regardless of offence type, officers trained in child protection would always interview the child victim, with operational detectives, who have not interviewed the child victim, or received specialist investigative interview training in relation to sex offenders, would interview the alleged offender. Thus, although the sample size was small, these data suggest that force policies in relation to the interviewing of alleged sex offenders, and the training they receive, appears to differ greatly.

Discussion

This research is the first to examine police officers' use of emotional utterances during specific offender interviews. The results indicated that officers, who had not interviewed the child victim prior to interviewing the alleged offender, used significantly more negative emotional utterances, than officers who had previously interviewed the child victim. The results were against our predictions, as previous research indicated that when police officers interview victims of serious crimes they often become traumatized themselves (Saakvitne & Pearlman, 1996), which could result in them becoming more emotional during the subsequent interview with the offender.

the total length of the transcript in minutes. The analysis was run again and the results of the t-tests were unchanged.

However, some officers may not view offender interviews as important, due to having previously interviewed the victim, thus having the belief they have the 'upper hand' during the interview. Researchers would argue (e.g. Holmberg *et al*, in press; Saakvitne & Pearlman, 1996; Lea *et al*, 1999; Pogrebin & Poole, 1991) that low levels of emotional behaviour could be due to officers' maintenance of impartiality and authority whilst conducting the offender interview, together with the knowledge that they must try to ensure they distance themselves from intense emotional reactions (Pogrebin & Poole, 1991). Police officers' perception that the public expects them to be fearless and calm, whatever the situation is vitally important in this context. If interviewing officers, who have interviewed the child, showed any form of emotional weakness, it is argued that many will believe that colleagues and supervisors would regard this as a weakness (Pogrebin & Poole, 1991).

Conversely, those officers who have not interviewed the child perhaps may not feel that the interview is important by virtue of non-exposure to the victim's account. This could be due to officers not having been exposed to the harrowing account or traumatizing event that their colleagues, who have previously interviewed the child victim, may have been exposed to. Thus, they may not feel the same uncompromising pressure and need to maintain composure and the distancing of themselves from intense emotional reactions (Pogrebin & Poole, 1991). As a result, officers who have not previously interviewed the child victim

Therefore, for the sake of simplicity, the total number of emotional utterances was retained as the main dependent variable.

are, arguably, more likely to 'speak their minds' during subsequent offender interviews. However, there is another possible explanation... quite often when one reads an account of child sexual abuse, one expects the child to be so traumatized that they would be in a complete state. However, in reality, a child who has suffered the most horrendous abuse may not necessarily show any untoward or outward behaviour or symptoms indicative of abuse during victim interviews. Thus, it could be argued that the reality of abuse is *less* emotional than one might perceive.

There were no effects on emotional utterances as a function of the gender of interviewing officers or type of abuse, and whilst this research was not focused upon the quality of offender interviews, the findings tend to support the argument by Milne & Bull (1999) that gender effects do not affect investigative interviews. Further research is required to substantiate the anecdotal evidence from officers that intrafamilial abuse investigations are more powerful and painful than other types of investigations.

The findings of this research are interesting from both a theoretical and practical perspective and are important for the Police Service to consider when deciding upon future force policies in relation to this type of specialist and highly emotive area of contemporary policing.

Training and Force Policies Regarding the Interviewing of Sex Offenders

Only one force was successful in providing a transcript where the interviewing officer had received specialist investigative interview training in relation to sex offenders. Initially, it was felt that the unavailability of transcripts could have been due to requesting information for investigations that had already been processed through the judicial system. However, forces confirmed that officers who investigate sexual offences involving children, past and present, only receive training on child protection matters, which includes background information on sexual offenders *per se*, but not on specific interview techniques relating to this cohort. Thus, by the mere lack of trained officers and the fact that there is no national policy relating to the child sexual abuse investigations and the interviewing of alleged child sex offenders, further research is clearly needed to investigate whether specific specialist investigative interview training is adequate and effective.

Although we were unable to evaluate the effectiveness or value of specialist investigative interview training in relation to sex offenders, the research corroborated the argument that there are no clear Home Office or ACPO guidelines regarding the specific interviewing of alleged child sex offenders. Thus, despite various studies, which have established that this offender group is 'unique' (Abel *et al*, 1984), it is strongly argued that there needs to be clear, direct ACPO action and policy to enable forces to improve in this important, professionally challenging and sensitive area.

Implications of Findings

It became apparent during this research that the majority of forces who agreed to take part currently manage this type of specialised area of policing in vastly differing ways. Some forces (n = 7) stated that specially trained officers carry out all intrafamilial abuse investigations, including all subsequent interviews with the child and alleged offenders. Others stated that if they were investigating extrafamilial abuse, an operational detective would interview the child, but would only occasionally interview the offender. These disparities raise some very interesting and ethical questions. For example, in the latter scenario, which officer would generally interview the offender? Who makes that decision? How is that decision made and is there a decision making framework that assists forces in reaching those decisions?

There were many variations, but the present study indicated that those forces who employ policies ensuring the same officers interview both the child victim and offender, achieve a less emotional (and arguably more productive and better quality) interview with alleged offenders, which subsequently ensures the P.E.A.C.E. and extant investigative interviewing principles are maintained. However, these are only preliminary findings from a reasonably small sample of forces and interviews. Clearly further research is needed forthwith to establish if this finding replicates across other forces.

Limitations of Study

Having videotapes of offender interviews would have enabled an examination of the facial micro-expressions of emotion and we could have established whether the micro-expressions identified correlated with the use of emotional language. The research was unable to establish officers' previous life experiences, including previous traumatizing events, family composition (e.g. children), whether or not the interviewing officers were dealing with cases in which the crime victim was of the same gender and age as their own child/ren, and the officers' personal attitudes, expectations and pre-conceived ideas towards sex offenders and victims of these crimes (see Holmberg *et al*, in press). These issues are vitally important as they can influence an individual's professional attitude on the quality and efficacy of particular interventions, in this case, the police interview (Hogue, 1993).

The present study did not look at the quality of the interview *per se*, or whether less emotional interviews resulted in more or less confessions during interviews and it is argued that this type of information would be essential for any replication of the study and to further advance this area of research.

Future Directions

Very little research has been carried out in the area of emotionality and conversational behaviour and, more generally, the inter-relations between emotions and language during

investigative interviewing. In the present political climate, police officers should not be expected (and the P.E.A.C.E. and investigative interviewing principles do not allow for it) to interview an offender over several hours, or days, without having a fundamental understanding of the different offence characteristics and subsequent variations of sex offender traits (e.g. intra & extrafamilial abuse). Additionally, police officers should also have an implicit understanding of emotionality and its possible impact on them and the interviewee who has, potentially, much to lose in an interview situation.

Future research would have to establish what interviewing officers felt about the level of their training and also, more controversially, what sex offenders thought about their specific experiences of the police with regard to how they were interviewed. For example, would more offenders have confessed or spoken more freely if their interviewers had conducted the interview in a different manner/approach, or with less negative emotion?

A further vital factor would be to establish police officers personality type with a view to ascertaining if an officer with a particular trait is more suited (professionally and personally) to interviewing specialist groups of offenders such as child molesters.

Conclusions

This study aimed to enhance our limited knowledge on a vitally important area of policing, and examined the use of emotional language by police officers during sex offender interviews. The study is the first conducted in this area and the results are enlightening, yet

provocative. Enlightening, because the results appear to contradict anecdotal evidence (e.g. that if an officer interviews a child victim, an officer will be more emotionally involved), and provocative because the results highlight the urgent need for further research in this highly sensitive and controversial area of contemporary policing. These areas need to be addressed to ensure that all forces carry out such difficult and emotional offender interviews to the same exacting and professional standards as is the case for other crimes.

Further research needs to be undertaken forthwith in order to explicate this under-researched area of psychology. The results of this study, and any further explication, could have a dramatic effect on the success of future investigative interviews of sex offenders. In short, if this study is replicated with similar results, the outcome has implications for police training and practice. Either way, it is hoped that the present research has gone some way to highlight the need for an urgent review of policy and procedures in relation to child sexual abuse investigations, and to highlight avenues for future research in this important, challenging and sensitive area of police investigative interviewing.

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Table 1. Exemplars of emotional utterances used by interviewing officers (with category totals).

| <i>Emotion State</i> | <i>Emotional Phrase/s</i> | <i>Total Phrases Found</i> |
|----------------------|---|----------------------------|
| Disgust | <p><i>"...you have had sex, not only with your niece, but a 15 year-old girl."</i></p> <p><i>"Well, the whole thing is disgusting, isn't it?"</i></p> | 15 |
| Anger | <p><i>"With respect, I'm interviewing you - I'm asking the questions okay?"</i></p> <p><i>"I'm not here to answer your questions."</i></p> | 23 (1) |
| Happiness | <i>"And it's a pleasure to meet you."</i> | 1(1) |
| Surprise | <p><i>"Did I? What did I say?"</i></p> <p><i>"You're quite shocked aren't you?."</i></p> | 10 (10) |
| Contempt | <p><i>"You're not suggesting it was an accident?"</i></p> <p><i>"You get off doing this do you?"</i></p> | 26 (2) |
| Sadness | <i>No examples found in transcripts</i> | 0 |
| Fear | <i>No examples found in transcripts</i> | 0 |
| | | N = 75 (14) |

Table 2. Mean number of negative emotional utterances (*disgust, anger, and contempt*) as a function of whether officers had previously interviewed the victim, the gender of the interviewer, and the type of offence (standard deviations in parentheses).

| | <i>Condition 1</i> | | <i>Condition 2</i> | | <i>Condition 3</i> | |
|------------------|------------------------------|----------------------------------|--------------------|-------------|---------------------|---------------------|
| | Previously Interviewed Child | Not Previously Interviewed Child | Male | Female | Intrafamilial Abuse | Extrafamilial Abuse |
| Mean Utterances | 0.86 (1.40) | 3.18 (3.61) | 1.75 (2.09) | 2.63 (4.20) | 1.53 (2.33) | 2.44 (3.38) |
| Total Interviews | n=15 | n=16 | n=20 | n=11 | n=13 | n=18 |
| | | | | | | N = 31 |