

CENTRE FOR RESEARCH AND
EVIDENCE ON SECURITY THREATS

AT A GLANCE: THE COGNITIVE INTERVIEW

An overview of an interviewing protocol which aims to improve the recall of accurate and reliable information from an interviewee.

15 MINUTE READ

INTERVIEWERS



“ The Cognitive Interview is a toolbox of techniques – choose and use techniques strategically, according to your particular interview scenario, modifying or adapting the various elements as the interviewee or situation requires. ”

WHAT IS THE COGNITIVE INTERVIEW (CI)?

The CI is a theory and evidence-based interviewing protocol which aims to improve the recall of accurate and reliable information from an interviewee. The CI approach addresses three primary psychological processes that underlie interviews with cooperative interviewees: (i) the social dynamics between the interviewee and interviewer, (ii) the interviewee's and interviewer's cognitive processes, and (iii) communication between the interviewee and interviewer. The CI protocol comprises a set of phases to work through to establish the prime conditions to maximize retrieval from memory and to enable communication of the retrieved information.

WHEN CAN IT BE USED?

The CI can be used, with a co-operative interviewee, in any debrief or interview where the goal is to elicit detailed information. The following description will outline the CI as a set of phases to be worked through. However, for the CI to be used effectively in the field, where the cognitive and social demands vary across situations and interviewees, it cannot be used as a recipe and applied to all interviewees in the same fashion. Rather, for greatest effect, it should be implemented as a toolbox of skills to be used strategically, including only those elements that are appropriate for the specific interview scenario, and modifying or adapting the various elements as the interviewee or situation demands.

STRUCTURE OF THE ENHANCED COGNITIVE INTERVIEW

PHASE 1: GETTING THE SOCIAL DYNAMICS RIGHT

- Greet and personalise the interview
- Establish rapport
- Pauses and no interruptions

PHASE 2: FACILITATING COMMUNICATION AND RECALL

- Focused retrieval and concentrate hard
- Report everything
- Transfer control

PHASE 3: FREE REPORT: MAXIMIZING INTERVIEWEES' AND INTERVIEWERS' COGNITIVE PROCESSING.

- Context reinstatement and sketch plans
- Open-ended questions

PHASE 4: QUESTIONING, TOPIC SELECTION AND PROMOTING EXTENSIVE AND VARIED RETRIEVAL.

- Report everything
- Interviewee-compatible questioning
- OK to say 'don't know'
- OK to say 'don't understand'
- Activate and probe an image
- Open and appropriate closed questions
- Varied and extensive retrieval
- Change the temporal order
- Change perspectives and spotlighting
- Sketch plans and drawing
- Focus on all senses

PHASE 5: INVESTIGATIVELY IMPORTANT QUESTIONS

PHASE 6: CLOSURE

PHASE 7: EVALUATION

PHASE ONE: GETTING THE SOCIAL DYNAMICS RIGHT

First impressions count – interviewees will talk to people they feel comfortable with and like. The opening phase of an interview will therefore determine how well the interview proceeds. Before beginning the interview it is necessary to establish trust. The interviewer should personalise the interview for example by introducing herself by name and greeting the interviewee by name. The interviewer needs to be seen as an individual as opposed to representing the organisation or any of its stereotypes. Name swapping (if appropriate) starts to help this process. The interviewer therefore needs to treat the interviewee as an individual with a unique set of needs, and in turn present herself as an identifiable person. Remembering information is a difficult task that requires deep concentration. An interviewee therefore needs to feel they can trust the interviewer and be at ease with them, as well as feeling a valued part of the interview.

Rapport requires that the interviewer interacts meaningfully with the interviewee, contributing as an interested party. Standardised phrases (e.g. “Have you any children?”) should be avoided as their repetition will convey to the interviewee that he is ‘just another interviewee’, which has the opposite effect – it depersonalises the interview. An interview in which rapport has been appropriately developed is natural and carries the participants along with it in a relaxed manner. Rapport is essential and a good rapport between interviewer and interviewee improves both the quantity and quality of information gained. Rapport therefore has a direct impact on the whole interview. Rapport is especially important where the type of information required is highly sensitive.

One way the interviewer can maintain rapport is through explicit signs of active listening, e.g. through the use of mirror key word repetition. For example,

Interviewee - “The man had a gun.”

Interviewer - “A gun.”

“

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Be mindful of the **location of the interview** – to gain full detail from memory it is advisable to interview in a quiet location free from as many visual and sound distractions as possible. Active listening also requires the interviewer to maintain concentration. The interviewer should minimise unnecessary distractions.

THINK ABOUT YOUR OWN NON-VERBAL BEHAVIOUR

In an interview non-verbal behaviour (e.g. body position, hand signals etc.) is just as important as verbal behaviour. In a two person interaction which is progressing well, each person's behaviour will tend over time to mirror that of the other person – the Principle of Synchrony. Interviewers can make use of this to influence the interviewee's behaviour, simply by displaying the desired behaviour themselves. For example, by speaking slowly in a calm, even voice and behaving in a relaxed way the interviewer can guide the interviewee to do so as well. The interviewer should encourage the interviewee



PRINCIPLE OF SYNCHRONY

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to speak slowly, as rapid speech (which is common for anxious interviewees) becomes a problem for note-taking and memory retrieval. If the interviewer sits in a relaxed manner in a non-confrontational orientation e.g. a 'ten to two' position (see Figure 1), avoids hectic arm movements and speaks in a soft tone of voice, the interviewer can promote a relaxed atmosphere in the interview.

PAUSES AND INTERRUPTIONS TO ENCOURAGE ACTIVE INTERVIEWEE PARTICIPATION

A co-operative interviewee should do most of the talking, but this may feel unnatural to them because in everyday conversation we tend to take turns and

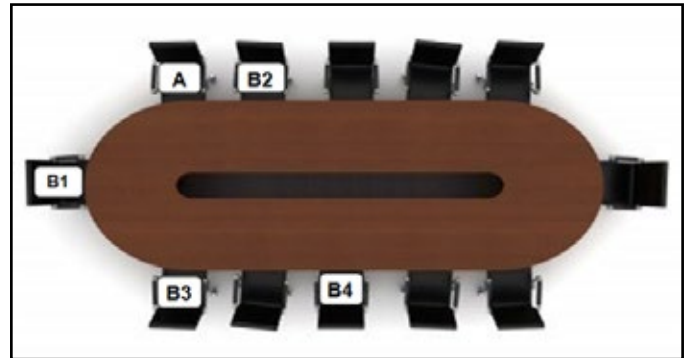


Figure 1 - Seats 'A' and 'B1', and 'B1' and 'B3' are sat in the 'ten to two' position.

so do not give lots of detail. The interviewer can help by: (i) encouraging the interviewee to provide detailed responses from the start of the interview, (ii) allowing them to give lengthy responses without interruption and, (iii) giving room for pauses.

People pause for a variety of reasons. Allowing for pauses is important so the interviewee can search their memory for additional detail, which may take time. They may also be looking for feedback from the interviewer: "Have I given enough information or do I need to continue?" Any interruption during a pause may prevent further information being reported. During these pauses interviewers should remain silent or express that it is okay to continue using simple utterances (e.g. "mm-hmm"). This non-verbal behavioural feedback should not be qualitative (e.g. saying "right") as this may give the interviewee the impression that this is the type of information required and can be taken as interviewer bias.

PHASE TWO: FACILITATING COMMUNICATION AND CONTROL

It is important to explain to the interviewee what is to be expected as people hate the unknown.

INTERVIEW AIMS

The aims and objectives of the interview need to be outlined at the start of the interview. Also the actual interview process should be explained (i.e. you will be getting them to give a free recall and then you will be asking some questions).

FOCUSED RETRIEVAL

Memory recall at the most detailed level requires focused attention and intense concentration. Interviewers should therefore attempt to help the interviewee achieve this by (i) interviewing in a place as free from distractions as possible and (ii) making sure the interviewee feels they have all the time they need to search their memory.

The interview should be conducted with only one interviewee at a time. Two or more interviewees may disrupt each other's responses, and the recollections of one may alter the memory and confidence of another.

REPORT EVERYTHING

It is at this point in the interview that interviewees are asked to report everything. The report everything instruction encourages interviewees to report everything they remember without any editing, even if the interviewee thinks the details are not important or cannot remember completely a particular aspect of the target event. For example:

"You were witness to the incident this morning, tell me everything you can, even the things you think are not important, and even if you cannot remember something completely. Everything which comes to mind tell me in your own time and pace."

This instruction also helps to promote detailed responses. Even co-operative adults often withhold more recall than they spontaneously report. One reason for this is that we use rules to aid effective communication. One such rule concerns the 'Maxim of Quantity', where it is deemed inappropriate and even rude if one person dominates the conversation. Think of the everyday questions: "How are you today?" and "Did you have a good holiday?" How much information do we really want when asking these questions? In an interview a different set of communication rules now apply, some of which are completely opposite to the usual ways of communicating. This is because your goal is to obtain as much good quality information from the interviewee as possible, a goal which does not normally underlie usual conversation. As it is the interviewee that holds all the vital information it is they who should be doing the majority of the talking.

TRANSFER OF CONTROL OF THE INFORMATION FLOW

Similarly, the interviewee will expect the interviewer to do all the talking. This is not the role of the interviewer in a CI. The role of the interviewer instead is as a memory facilitator, a person to help the interviewee remember. Therefore, the interviewer should explicitly pass the control of the interview to the interviewee. For example, the interviewer could say:

"I wasn't at xxx so I do not know what happened. You are the one with all the information, so tell me everything that you can remember."

PHASE THREE: FREE REPORT, MAXIMIZING COGNITIVE PROCESSING

MENTAL REINSTATEMENT OF CONTEXT

Context can have a powerful effect on memory (e.g. in crime reconstructions). The context reinstatement instruction asks interviewees to reconstruct in their minds the context, both physical (environmental) and personal (e.g. how they felt at the time) features of the witnessed event. For example:

“Create a picture in your mind of xxx. Think of where you were in xxx. Think about the layout of the xxx. Think about all the objects that were there and where they sat in relation to each other. Think about the colours that were there. Get a clear picture in your mind. Think about the people who were present. Think about all the sounds that were there. How were you feeling at the time? Get a really good picture in your mind and then tell me everything you can remember without leaving anything out. All that pops into your mind, tell me.”

The instruction regarding context reinstatement can take quite a while to give. It is necessary to leave a pause between each of the mini-questions and statements given to interviewees to allow them enough time to picture the event and reinstate the context. The questions and statements, which must not be leading or suggestive, should be asked in a slow and deliberate manner and delivered in the past tense. It is also sometimes helpful if interviewees close their eyes if they wish. If they do not want to do this then getting them to focus on a blank wall, or part of the floor or wall which is free from distractions can also be beneficial.

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The free narrative is the stage in the interview where the most accurate information is obtained.

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The use of sketch plans may also be helpful here especially if (i) time is of the essence and/or (ii) if the interviewee is uncomfortable mentally reinstating the context of the event. Instead the interviewee could be asked to draw the layout of the event to be remembered and describe who was where, etc. This will also help the interviewee reinstate the context and could be a useful tool for the subsequent questioning phase of the interview to help focus the interviewee and structure your topic selection.

This phase also forms, for the interviewer, the planning stage of the forthcoming questioning phase of the interview. Therefore, *brief* note taking is recommended at this stage. If the interviewer takes too many notes at this stage, this tends to distract the interviewee, hindering the flow of recall. In addition, if the interviewer slows the interviewee down in order to take detailed notes, this again hinders maximum retrieval and important information may be lost. This depends on the method of recording you are using. It is essential however, that the interviewee is not interrupted during his or her narration in any way and that the interviewer should keep any questions until later on in the interview. It is at this stage in the interview where the most accurate information is obtained.

PHASE FOUR: QUESTIONING, TOPIC SELECTION AND PROMOTING VARIED AND EXTENSIVE RETRIEVAL

Before asking the interviewee any questions it may be helpful to repeat the report everything instruction, and to explain that this is a difficult task which requires a lot of concentration and that it is acceptable to say 'I don't know' to a question. For example:

"I am going to ask you some questions now based on what you have already told me. It is fine to say 'I don't know' to any questions you do not know the answer to. Tell me everything you can remember in response to each question."

Interviewers should if at all possible use open-ended prompts to encourage detailed responses. In addition, in this part of the interview the questions should relate only to what the interviewee has already said in the earlier free recall phase. Interviewees are also told that it is perfectly acceptable to say "I don't understand" to questions asked of them.

MENTAL IMAGERY AND MOLECULAR CONTEXT REINSTATEMENT

This technique is similar to the mental reinstatement of context. The context here is very specific in that it refers to a particular moment in time. For example, if the first aspect of the event that the interviewee reported in his free narrative was the target, he can be now asked the following:

"You mentioned the target. I want you to try and get a good clear picture of him in your mind's eye. When did you get the best view of him? Think of what he looked like, his overall appearance. What was he wearing? What could you smell? What did he say? When you have a good clear picture of him, at that point in time, tell me everything you can about him in as much detail as you can."

This is what is called activating and probing an

image — or molecular/mini context reinstatement. For each image start with open-ended questions and follow-up with specific-closed questions, but only when the open-ended questions do not result in the desired information. Avoid using leading questions. Open-ended questions promote further free recall from an interviewee and tend to start with the words; Tell, Explain, Describe, and Demonstrate. Specific closed questions on the other hand tend to start with the words: Who, What, When, Where, and Why. Open-ended questions provide information which is more detailed and accurate than specific closed questions.



OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS

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TOPIC SELECTION

Within the questioning phase of the interview the interviewer should break down the interviewee's account into manageable topics and expand upon each area using open-ended and then specific-closed questions. Try to avoid topic hopping (i.e. rapidly moving from one topic to another and back again), as this interferes with the retrieval process. For maximum retrieval the order of the questioning should resemble the structure of the interviewee's

knowledge of the event and should not be based on the interviewer's notion or a set protocol; this is **interviewee compatible questioning**. It is the interviewer's task however, to deduce how the relevant information is stored by the interviewee (through free report) and to organise the order of questions/topics accordingly. Note that the interviewee will only have a limited concentration span.

EXTENSIVE RETRIEVAL

It is at this stage in the interview that interviewers could help interviewees remember more by using a variety of further tools, such as focusing on different senses – like sound. The **use of other senses** is often particularly useful for interviewing victims/witnesses of violent offences, who may have switched off visually, and instead encoded much of the event through the other senses. The use of **sketch plans and drawing** can also be used at this stage. Another useful technique to promote extensive retrieval is asking the interviewee to recall the event in a different temporal order, such as **reverse order recall**. For example:

“We are going to try something which sometimes helps people remember more. What I am going to ask you to do now is to tell me what happened but this time backwards. It is not as hard as it sounds. OK, What was the very last thing you can remember happening?..... What happened just before that?..... What happened just before that?..... . (This prompt is repeated until the interviewee has reached the beginning of the incident).”

Memory is constructive and when people are asked to remember an event their remembering is influenced by their prior knowledge, expectations and the employment of scripts (e.g. what typically happens in certain situations like attending worship or the weekly shop). When an event is freely re-

called most people report the event in real time (i.e. in the order in which it took place). When recalling in this way people use their script knowledge of such events to help them recall this particular event. This results in the recall of information which is in line with the script. However, script inconsistent information which did occur, may not be recalled. The change order instruction invites the interviewee to examine the actual memory record, which in turn can result in the reporting of additional information which is incidental to the script.

The **change perspectives technique** also promotes extensive retrieval. People have a tendency to report events from their own psychological perspective.

The CI change perspective instruction asks the interviewee to recall the event from the perspective of another person who was present. For example:

“OK we are going to try another technique which may help memory, but do not guess at information. Go through the event again and focus on a particular person in the event. Like they are in a spot-light on stage.”

There are also additional **memory jogs** used in conjunction with the CI techniques described above. These are used to help the reporting of specific details concerning people (e.g. names, faces, voices, clothing, appearance) and objects (e.g. vehicles, number sequences, weapons). For example, people are often unable to remember names. To assist with this the interviewer should request the interviewee to think about the following: name frequency (common or unusual name?); name length (short or long and number of syllables?); and the beginning letter of the name by conducting an alphabetical search. Similar techniques can help in the remembering of vehicle licence plate characters.



TOOLS FOR RETRIEVAL

Further tools for memory retrieval include: using other senses; drawing; reverse-order recall; changing perspectives. These should be used strategically, according to the particular interviewee or situation.

PHASE FIVE: INVESTIGATIVELY IMPORTANT QUESTIONS

At some point in the interview it may be necessary to introduce information that has not already been mentioned by the interviewee, but is important for the investigation in question. It is at this end point of the interview (or series of interviews) where leading information could be given as a last resort,

however the following needs to be borne in mind:
(i) all interviewees may be vulnerable to suggestion;
(ii) information gained from leading questions may have limited value; and (iii) information gained from leading questions should immediately be elaborated upon by using an open-ended question.

PHASE SIX: CLOSURE

At the end of the interview the interviewer should attempt to leave the interviewee in a positive frame of mind. This is especially the case regarding recall of highly emotive events. In this phase the interviewer should gradually return to the neutral topics discussed in the rapport phase. In addition

the interviewer should thank the interviewee for his co-operation and efforts. The interviewer should at this point ask the interviewee if he has any questions. It is important to leave the interviewee with a positive last impression of the interview.

PHASE SEVEN: EVALUATION

Interviewers should re-visit the interview. If the interaction was recorded then this can be done by listening to and/or watching the recording. The interviewer should examine the information provided and see how it fits in with information currently

held. Also the interviewer should make an evaluation of their interview methods – what did they do well? What could they improve upon next time? What worked? What didn't work? What can be learnt about this particular interviewee?

READ MORE

Ron Fisher, and Ed Geiselman. (1992). *Memory-enhancing techniques for investigative interviewing*. Springfield, Ill: Charles C. Thomas.

Rebecca Milne, and Ray Bull. (1999). *Investigative interviewing: Psychology and practice*. Chichester: Wiley.

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NOTE

This guide is based on Professor Rebecca Milne's 2004 training manual: '*The Enhanced Cognitive Interview: A step-by-step guide*'. To find about more about the manual, contact CREST.

IMAGE CREDITS

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