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Designing Effective Training Programs for Investigative Interviewers of Children

Martine B. Powell*

Abstract

'Best-practice' guidelines for conducting investigative interviews with children are well established in the literature, yet few investigative interviewers actually adhere to such guidelines in the field. One of the problems is that little discussion has focused on how such guidelines are learned and sustained by professionals. To address this concern, the current article reviews the key elements of interview training programs that are known to promote competent interviewing. These elements include: (i) the establishment of key principles or beliefs that underpin effective interviewing, (ii) the adoption of an interview framework that maximises narrative detail, (iii) clear instruction in relation to the application of the interview framework, (iv) effective ongoing practice, (v) expert feedback and (vi) regular evaluation of interviewer performance. A description and justification of each element is provided, followed by broad recommendations regarding how these elements can be implemented by police and human service organisations in a cost-effective manner.

Introduction

In cases of suspected child abuse, children are usually crucial witnesses (McGough 1994). To ensure that the evidence obtained from child abuse witnesses is both accurate and admissible in court, investigative interviewers require specialised skills in forensic interviewing. Decades of controlled research in both field and laboratory settings has resulted in clear international consensus regarding the most effective way of eliciting reliable and detailed statements from children (see Poole & Lamb 1998; Powell et al 2005 for review). The central aim of all investigative interview protocols is to obtain a comprehensive narrative account of the alleged offence, with as little specific prompting as possible from the interviewer (Poole & Lamb 1998; Wilson & Powell 2001). Unfortunately, however, most professionals do not adhere to this approach when interviewing children.

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Instead, investigative interviewers mostly ask specific questions, which risk contaminating the child's account (see Powell et al 2005 for review).

In most jurisdictions, professionals are not permitted to conduct interviews with child witnesses for investigative or evidential purposes until they have completed a training course in investigative interviewing of children. The global incompetence of investigative interviewers, therefore, should be conceptualised as inadequacy of training, rather than complete lack of engagement in training per se. Until recently the limitations of investigative interviewer training courses were not well identified. Most of the research had merely documented the ineffectiveness of specific training programs by measuring interviewers' adherence to best-practice guidelines pre-and post-training (Lamb, Sternberg, Orbach, Esplin et al 2002; Lamb, Sternberg, Orbach, Hershkowitz et al 2002; Orbach et al 2000; Sternberg et al 1999; Sternberg et al 1997; Sternberg et al 2001) as opposed to directly examining the particular barriers to implementing 'best-practice' interview guidelines. Further, while concerns have been raised about the quality of investigative interviewer training, criticisms have usually arisen within the context of broad evaluations of the usefulness of electronically recorded evidence (Clarke & Milne 2001; Davies et al 1995; McConachy 2002) or research projects examining the benefit of isolated training techniques (e.g., Powell, Fisher et al 2008; in press). Thus, descriptions of *how* training courses should be delivered have not typically been provided.

To address the urgent need for practical guidance in this area, the current article describes the key features of investigative interviewer training programs known to promote and sustain competent interviewers. This article draws primarily on recent research specifically related to this issue, as well as the author's longstanding practical experience as a trainer and the large body of literature regarding the development of complex skills in other domains. Overall, six essential elements of training programs are identified and discussed in this review. These elements include: (i) the establishment of key principles or beliefs that underpin effective interviewing, (ii) the adoption of an interview framework that maximises narrative detail, (iii) clear instruction in relation to the application of the interview framework, (iv) effective ongoing practice, (v) expert feedback and (vi) regular evaluation of interviewer performance. A description and justification of each element is provided, followed by broad recommendations regarding how these elements can be implemented by police and human service organisations in a cost-effective manner.

The Establishment of Key Principles or Beliefs that Underpin Effective Interviewing

A major challenge for trainers in investigative interviewing (as with any practical skill) is to facilitate students' learning in a manner that will positively impact students' behaviour or performance in the field. To have any practical benefit, courses need to be practical in focus. In other words, courses need to teach trainee interviewers exactly *what* they need to achieve, *how* they will achieve it, and the reason *why* they need to adopt the particular skills being taught. An underlying philosophy or set of beliefs that is compatible with best-practice interview guidelines is also critical for long-term retention of information and for motivating participants to engage in effortful learning (Ericsson et al 1993; Macaulay & Cree 1999). Indeed, investigative interviewers' lack of awareness of their role within the interview context has been shown to be a major barrier inhibiting transfer of learning from the classroom to the workplace (Wright & Powell 2006, 2007; Wright et al 2007).

Core beliefs that underpin adherence to best-practice interviewing evolve over time as interview models become more refined. One broad shift in the past few years relates to the precise impact of open-ended questions (i.e., those questions that encourage elaborate responses without dictating what specific information is required). Over a decade ago, most experts perceived that children's responses to open-ended questions (while accurate) were scant in detail, and that additional support via specific or closed questions and physical cues/props was usually needed to elicit detailed accounts (e.g., Dent & Stephenson 1979; Goodman & Reed 1986; Powell & Thomson 1994). Recent research indicates that this is not so (e.g., Lamb et al 2003; Orbach & Lamb 2007). Although children's *initial* responses to free recall or open-ended prompts may be brief and lacking in detail, gentle persistence with open-ended questions (particularly those that use children's utterances as cues for further information) can often result in extensive or contextually elaborate accounts, even among very young children (e.g., four years of age).

To identify and instil appropriate beliefs or principles that underpin effective interviewing, trainers not only require up-to-date knowledge of the scientific literature related to children's testimony, they also require up-to-date knowledge of human *learning* processes. The educational psychology literature shows that the acquisition of new beliefs and knowledge is a highly complex, constructive, and cumulative process (Shuell 1990). Meaningful learning that will be retained in the long-term requires several elements including: active engagement in the learning process, repeated exposure to material in varied contexts, and conceptual embedding of the information within real life examples related to one's own practice (Conway et al 1997; Herbert & Burt 2004; Shuell 1990). Applying these elements is a drawn out process, thus trainers must be highly selective regarding the content that is taught in their courses. Courses that try to cover too much material risk leaving trainees confused and remembering very little (Fisher & Geiselman 1992). It would be far more effective for trainers to select a few key concepts that are critical for the acquisition of practical interviewing skills and to ensure that these are consolidated, rather than to try to cover all relevant material in a single course.

One priority at the commencement of interviewer training courses should be to identify and dispute any core beliefs of trainee interviewers that are *incompatible* with the scientific literature on interviewing. Although beliefs vary among individuals, three myths are common, which are destructive because they undermine the critical role of open-ended questions and the fact that extensive training is needed to ensure that these questions are learned and sustained. First, many professionals believe that personal attributes or background factors related to the individual interviewer are associated with adoption of best-practice interviewing guidelines (Wright & Powell 2007). Although a wide range of personal and background factors related to the interviewer has been explored (e.g., experience in interviewing, knowledge of child development or law, job rank or status, gender), the only factor currently shown to contribute to the variance in individual interviewers' adherence to best-practice interview technique is training that adheres to the elements outlined in this paper (Lamb & Garretson 2003; Lamb, Sternberg, Orbach, Esplin et al 2002; Lamb, Sternberg, Orbach, Hershkowitz et al 2002; Powell et al 2005; Smith et al in press; Sternberg et al 2001; Warren et al 1999).¹

¹ Research in this area is still in its infancy. With further refinement of performance measures and global improvements in interviewer competency, personal or background attributes that facilitate or moderate training outcomes may be identified. However, the current findings are robust and clearly indicate that quality of training is the over-riding variable.

Second, many investigative interviewers falsely believe that the credibility (believability) of a witness statement is associated with statement accuracy (Poole & Lindsay 1998) and that potential contamination of a child witnesses' account is determined predominantly by the presence of leading questions (i.e., questions that presume or suggest details that have not been previously mentioned by the child; Wright & Powell 2007; Wright et al 2007). In contrast, research has shown that children can provide quite convincing but entirely false accounts of events, even events involving their own bodies (Ceci, Crotteau-Huffman et al 1994; Ceci, Loftus et al 1994; Quas et al 1999), and that children's accounts can be shaped to confirm interviewers' inaccurate beliefs in a variety of ways. These include: using repeated suggestions, peer pressure, selective reinforcement of responses, invitations to speculate and providing highly specific contextual cues (Bruck et al 2002; Ceci & Bruck 1995; Erdmann et al 2004; Ghetti & Alexander 2004; Hughes-Scholes & Powell in press; Pezdek & Hodge 1999; Powell 2000).

Third, professionals often overestimate the value of auxiliary interview techniques (e.g., ground rule instructions, developmental and competency assessments, cues and props) in minimising errors or misunderstandings and in overcoming 'emotional' inhibitions to truthful reporting. The reality is that when children misreport events or they withhold information it is usually due to the nature of the questions asked (Agnew & Powell 2004; Bala et al 2000; Ceci et al 2002; Ellis et al 2003; Poole & Lamb 1998; Powell et al 2000; Powell et al 2002). Further, extensive use of warnings (Nesbit & Markham 1999; Righarts 2007) or drawings (Brown et al 2007) has been shown in some contexts to *impede* desirable interview outcome.

The Adoption of an Interview Framework that Maximises Narrative Detail

The aim of any investigative interview is to elicit the most accurate, detailed and complete account of an event or situation, in a manner that minimises unnecessary stress or discomfort of the interviewee (Poole & Lamb 1998; Wilson & Powell 2001). As mentioned previously, the best way to achieve this goal is to elicit as much information as possible via open-ended questions, and to conduct the interview in a supportive distraction-free environment where the interviewer's questions and behaviour emphasise the witness's capabilities and role as informant (Orbach et al 2000; Poole & Lamb 1998; Milne & Bull 1999; Wilson & Powell 2001). Ideal questions (irrespective of whether they are open-ended) are those that: are non-leading, allow flexibility in the response, are simply phrased and target concepts that are appropriate for the developmental level of the interviewee (Graffam Walker 1999; Powell & Snow 2007a). Ideal behaviours are those that: show the witness that (s)he is being heard, understood and not judged, show faith in the witness's ability to competently communicate and are accepting of any response – even 'don't know' (Agnew et al 2006; Wilson & Powell 2001).

To assist interviewers in eliciting reliable and detailed statements during investigations of abuse, interview protocols have been developed to target particular interviewee groups. For example, the Cognitive Interview was developed mainly for interviewing cooperative adults and Conversation Management was designed for use with hostile witnesses or suspects.²

² Without substantial modification, these protocols are generally considered unsuitable for children (Fisher & McCauley 1995; Geiselman 1999). The PEACE interview model and accompanying training program,

Two prominent protocols developed specifically for use with child witnesses (i.e., 3- and 18 years of age)³ include Achieving Best Evidence in Criminal Proceedings (Home Office 2007) and the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) Protocol (Sternberg et al 2002). Achieving Best Evidence is used throughout the UK, whereas the NICHD protocol (in its entirety) is used mostly in the US, Israel and Europe. In Australia, police and human service organisations have tended to develop their own protocols which represent a hybrid of different protocols. For example 'The Tri-partite interview' technique used in Victoria and the 'Four Phased Interview Technique' used in Western Australia are adaptations of the UK model (a phased approach) yet they also feature a preliminary interview about an innocuous event modelled on the NICHD interview. Further, the Tri-partite interview consists of strategies dictated by Powell for eliciting a disclosure of abuse (see Powell 2005; Powell & Snow 2007b).

Irrespective of their features, however, all child interview protocols share several core elements since they have evolved from the same underlying principles of memory and social cognition that have been articulated in the literature. Each model includes: (a) an initial greeting, (b) a brief rapport-building period and establishing the proper social role for the witness, (c) introducing the topic of concern, (e) eliciting a narrative account of the entire crime event, (f) more focused or specific questions regarding critical details not previously provided and (g) closure of the interview in a way that promotes further communication. Importantly, the interview protocols merely dictate an 'ideal approach' and flexibility on the part of the interviewer is required when administering them. For example, while specific questions should ideally be postponed until later in an interview, specific and even leading questions may (in certain contexts) be appropriate to establish what offence occurred prior to seeking a narrative account of the offence. In some cases (i.e., where the child has good language skills, good memory of the offence, and few inhibitions to reporting), no focused or specific questions may be warranted in the interview at all.

Rather than emphasising adherence to an interview protocol as the goal of investigative interviewers, trainers should define a good interview as one where the interviewer has facilitated the voice of the child in a way that enables the child to accurately describe his or her experiences and the nature of the *criminality* alleged. A frequent, legitimate complaint of legal professionals and interviewing experts is that interviewers become too 'focused and lost in the minutiae' without realising that the elements needed to support the charges are often contained within the child's 'story', which is impeded by numerous questions (Davis et al 1999; Guadagno & Powell in press; Guadagno et al 2006; Wright & Powell 2007). An account which adheres to a story framework facilitates comprehension of the listener by including elements such as the setting, the initiating and central actions, motivations and goals, internal responses and consequences in a manner that enables the relationships between events and actors to be clearly labelled (Murfett et al 2008; Snow et al 2008; Westcott & Kynan 2004). Although research is still refining which questions promote the elicitation of various story elements, we know that open-ended questions play a critical role, particularly broad open-ended questions and those that focus the account on 'what happened' as opposed to eliciting descriptive details (Snow et al 2008; Powell & Snow 2007a).

developed in the UK (see Clarke & Milne 2001) incorporates the use of either Conversation Management or the Cognitive Interview, thus this model is generally not referred to in the child interview literature.

³ Interview protocols for use with children are also generally suitable for other vulnerable witnesses such as persons with an intellectual disability and persons from cultural minority groups.

Another recent area of research that will probably drive future reform of interview protocols is interviewing about *repeated* abuse. This is such a crucial area because most child abuse offences are usually repeated and one major difficulty in prosecuting such cases is lack of particularising details (Guadagno et al 2006; *Podirsky v R* 1990; *S v R* 1989). Further, with repeated offences there is a high risk of intrusion of details from other incidents or offences into the target incident or offence that is being recalled (Roberts & Powell 2001). Preliminary research in this area has led to several recommendations for minimising intrusion errors including: using broad open-ended questions, avoiding presumptions about the timing of events, conducting the interview as soon as possible and exhausting accounts of several occurrences or offences (one at a time) before eliciting generic (typical) recall (Powell et al 2007). Researchers are now focusing their attention on identifying different types of memory *practice* that may facilitate the discrimination and labelling of distinct experiences of abuse (Brubacher et al 2008; Powell & Thomson 2003; Roberts & Powell 2003).

Clear Instruction in Relation to the Application of the Interview Framework

Having a general interview guide or framework does not necessarily imply that interviewers can conduct an interview in a manner that would be viewed favourably by experts in interview technique. Trainee interviewers must also have the *tools* (i.e., effective questions) to *apply* the framework. Such tools need to be learned because they are not habitually used in English speaking cultures (Powell 2002).

In recognition of the immense difficulty trainee interviewers have in applying general interview guidelines, some expert trainers have become prescriptive in their approach, providing key phrases, common question stems and sequences of questions to use at various stages through the interview (Powell 2003; Powell & Snow 2007b; Sternberg et al 2001). Further, some experts have become more refined in their classification of open-ended questions (Powell & Snow 2007a). The danger of not providing a partially 'scripted' protocol is that there is considerable scope for trainee interviewers to re-interpret the interview model to fit with the tools or questions that come naturally to them (i.e., specific 'who', 'what', 'when', 'where', 'how' questions; Wright & Powell 2006). For example, a common misinterpretation is that the narrative account (which *should* form the major component of the interview) is perceived to be a relatively brief component of the interview (Wright & Powell 2006). In particular, once the witness has responded to the initial question ('Tell me everything that happened from beginning to end'), interviewers often interpret their role as being to 'drill down' or 'flesh out' parts of the initial account using specific questions.

As explained earlier, poor use of open-ended questions to expand the narrative account is due (in part) to misconceptions about the value of such questions. The use of the terms 'phases' or 'stages' in interview models may possibly compound this misconception because the words imply that questions inevitably become more specific or focused as the interview progresses and that the narrative account represents a discrete phase of the interview. This is no longer perceived by experts to be so (Lamb et al 2003; Powell & Snow 2007a, 2007b). For a small proportion of witnesses adherence to open-ended questions may not be possible. However, in the majority of field interviews described in evaluation studies, the witness appeared willing and able to give extensive narrative detail about their experiences, but their ability to do so was severely restricted by under use of open-ended

questions (see Powell et al 2005 for review). Experts now recommend that the majority of detail obtained in an investigative interview should be preceded by open-ended questions.

In addition to the provision of a structured or partially 'scripted' protocol, misconceptions of the interview process can be minimised during training courses in four ways. First, they can be minimised by emphasising the *practical* implications arising from material presented in the course. There is little point in relaying information or theories about child development and the nature of sexual assault unless clear, precise and empirically validated recommendations can be drawn about *how* hurdles or limitations arising in the interview can be overcome. If the information relayed has no practical benefit or meaning, it is likely to be quickly forgotten or will be merely retained in memory as isolated facts (Herbert & Burt 2004). The onus for drawing practical implications must be placed on the expert instructor rather than trainee interviewers. If trainee interviewers have limited prior experience and knowledge in applying interview technique, there would be minimal value in conducting group brainstorming exercises in order to generate recommendations about how specific challenges can be overcome.

Second, misinterpretations of the interview process are minimised when trainee interviewers are given clear exemplars of best practice illustrating how various principles can be applied. Exemplars of best-practice can be provided in many forms (e.g., actual interview transcripts, simulated role-playing exercises, films). Training videos or DVDs (including actual or simulated interviews) have proven particularly beneficial in facilitating the acquisition of practical skills compared to learning relayed via verbal instruction only (Arnspiger 1933; Bashman & Treadwell 1995; Berger 1970; Walter 1975). Viewing an entire interview first-hand helps trainee interviewers to see how the *various* skills or elements of an interview model are interconnected, and it can help shape realistic expectations of the job (Davies, Marshall et al 1998). A single interview, however, cannot capture all the common hurdles or 'pot holes' that arise in interviews with children. Expertise in interviewing (as with any professional skill) arises from the development of highly complex mental representations of numerous and varied experiences where challenges in skill mastery have been successfully overcome (Herbert & Burt 2004).

Third, misinterpretations about how to apply interview protocols are minimised when terminology for various questions is consistent within the training program and with prominent guides in the area. In the child eyewitness arena, classification of questions is quite distinct from those used in the adult interviewing area (e.g., Fisher & Geiselman 1992; Milne & Bull 1999). In relation to adult interviewing, questions are generally classified as being open or closed depending on whether they were designed to elicit an elaborate response. In contrast, prominent child interview guides (e.g., Poole & Lamb 1998; Wilson & Powell 2001) classify questions according to two dimensions: the degree of elaboration *and* the degree to which they dictate what specific information needs to be recalled. Thus questions tend to be classified by child interview experts as open-ended or specific, with the latter category including closed questions (e.g., questions that elicit a one or two word response) as well as cued-recall questions that focus on what specific detail needs to be recalled (e.g., Who, What, When, Where, How questions). The need for this multi-dimensional definition of open-ended questions has arisen from the recognition that children are more suggestible than adults and they often attempt to answer highly focused questions even when they have no recollection of the detail requested (Waterman et al 2000, 2001). While some child interview guides (e.g., Wakefield 2006) define open-ended questions as 'Wh' questions (e.g., questions starting with 'Who', 'When'), it is unlikely that such questions would elicit narrative accounts from children.

Finally, elaborate understanding of interview frameworks arises from experience applying the models within controlled settings where performance can be carefully monitored by an expert (Powell et al 2005; Stevenson et al 1992). Indeed, it is often not until trainee interviewers try to put the skills into practice that their limitations can be perceived and appropriate forms of remedial intervention determined (Powell & Guadagno in press). This issue is expanded on in the next section of this article.

Effective Ongoing Practice

Ongoing practice plays a critical role in the mastery of complex skills across all professional domains (Donovan & Radosevich 1999; Ericsson et al 1993; Helsen et al 1998; Hodges & Starkes 1996). In relation to interviewing child witnesses, the role of practice has been demonstrated by tracking an increase in investigative interviewers' use of open-ended questions (and the later introduction of specific questions) with the adoption of this element and a decline in performance following a period of time (e.g., 12 weeks) when no practice (in addition to the interviewers' usual workplace duties) has been maintained (Lamb, Sternberg, Orbach, Esplin et al 2002; Lamb, Sternberg, Orbach, Hershowitz et al 2002; Orbach et al 2000; Sternberg et al 2001; Powell, Fisher et al in press; Smith et al in press).⁴ The important role of practice is recognised by both experts and trainee interviewers. In qualitative interviews where interviewers have been asked to relay how their training could have been improved, the need for more practice was one of the most commonly cited suggestions (Aarons et al 2004; Clarke & Milne 2001; Guadagno et al 2006; McConachy 2002; Powell & Wright in press; Schollum et al 2006; Wright & Powell 2007; Wright et al 2006; Wright et al 2007).

To be most effective, practice needs to be spaced (interspersed with rest intervals) and maintained over a long period of time (Donovan & Radosevich 1999). It cannot be confined to a two or three week training course. Further, practice tasks need to target specific goals and be tailored to an individual's ability level. Stimuli (e.g., silence, lack of specific detail, irrelevant or ambiguous responses) that would *normally* provoke an inappropriate question from the particular interviewer in the field must be included in the task. In other words, when practising a skill, one learns what to do by making errors and correcting them, as well as by making the correct responses themselves (McGeogh 1947). This is one advantage of using actors to play the role of the child in simulated training exercises. Trained actors can adapt their performance to the ability level of the interviewer and can respond to questions in a way that is reminiscent of the challenges that interviewers encounter in the workplace with different interviewee groups (Powell, Fisher et al in press; Powell & Wright in press). While the use of trained actors is more costly than using fellow trainee interviewers (i.e., training of these actors must be monitored and can take up to 20 hours), the benefit of this investment has been demonstrated well after the training course has been completed (Powell, Fisher et al in press).

One of the limitations of prior evaluation research is that critiques have focused almost solely on interviewers' poor choice of specific questions, given the prevalence of these within interviews. As interviewers start to use more open-ended questions, more detailed critiques will emerge regarding the limitations of these latter questions. For example, Powell and Guadagno (in press) identified several limitations in the use of open-ended questions

⁴ In most prior studies, practice was combined with feedback and instruction, however its benefit in isolation of other training elements has been demonstrated (Powell, Fisher et al 2008).

among interviewers who had undergone an intensive course in open-ended question usage. Common problems included: inviting free-narrative recall without establishing what event occurred, asking for descriptive information such as what a person looked like prior to establishing what actually happened, using phrases that discourage elaborate responses, using a limited range of open-ended questions, including repetitive, unnecessarily wordy questions and vocabulary and concepts that were inappropriate for the child's developmental capacity. Importantly, these problems were not limited to those interviewers who used a low frequency of open-ended questions.

Identification of individual interviewers' particular limitations when using open-ended questions is essential for the design of fine-tuned remedial strategies in interview technique. For example, interviewers who abandon open-ended questions early would probably benefit from practice with adult respondents who can behaviourally reinforce the use of open-ended questions (Powell, Fisher et al in press). For those interviewers who use open-ended questions but the range and structure of the questions are limited, practice may be needed in the rote learning of different question stems (Powell & Wright in press). For those trainee interviewers who persist with leading questions, or use vocabulary or concepts that are too advanced for the child, practice tasks could be established where children recall innocuous videotaped events that were staged at their school. The advantage of this latter technique is that interviewers can later observe first hand (by comparing the children's responses to the actual event) the detrimental effect of poorly phrased questions (Powell 2002). Interviewers who are highly susceptible to preconceived ideas about what occurred may also benefit from engaging in strategies designed to assist in overcoming errors and biases in thinking (Gibbs & Gambrill 1996; Poole & Lamb 1998).

Expert Feedback

Although interviewing performance has been shown to improve (in some circumstances) with practice alone (Powell, Fisher et al in press; Powell, Fisher et al 2008), performance is clearly maximised when practice is combined with expert feedback (Powell, Fisher et al 2008). The importance of feedback is twofold. First, when it is accurate, feedback assists in narrowing the gap between professionals' *subjective* appraisals of their (or other professionals') abilities and *actual* performance (as measured against best-practice interview models). For example, investigators trained by Fisher and Geiselman (1992) claimed that they rarely interrupted eyewitnesses but were surprised when recordings of their interviews indicated otherwise. In a study by Berliner and Lieb (2001) interviewers rated their interviews more positively than experts. Further, Wright et al (2007) demonstrated a negligible relationship between interviewers' appraisals of, and actual performance, in relation to use of open-ended questions. Thus without expert feedback, interviewers have no way of knowing whether they have achieved the goals specified by best-practice interview guidelines.

Second, feedback is a form of positive educational intervention when it focuses on the task per se (as opposed to being perceived as a personal attack on the individual) and it elaborates on *why* certain questions are problematic and assists the interviewer in generating alternative questions or behaviours (Kluger & DeNisi 1996). For example, Lamb, Sternberg, Orbach, Esplin et al (2002), Lamb, Sternberg, Orbach, Hershkowitz et al (2002), and Powell, Fisher et al (2008) demonstrated the long term benefits of line-by-line feedback administered by an expert for improving trainee interviewers' adherence to, and understanding of, best-practice interview technique. One of the most effective forms of

feedback demonstrated to date is that where trainee interviewers are stopped at various stages in the simulated interviews so that an expert instructor can immediately identify a problem, assist in generating alternative questions and prevent errors from being further rehearsed (Powell, Fisher et al 2008).

Research in relation to the benefits of feedback, however, is still in its infancy. As with practice, the precise combination and number of feedback opportunities needed to produce optimal benefits can not yet be specified. The importance of further research in this area is highlighted by a meta-analysis of 3,000 papers examining the effect of feedback interventions on performance (across all domains). This meta-analysis showed that in over a third of all instances, performance *declined* as a result of feedback⁵ (Kluger & DeNisi 1996). Thus it is possible that feedback currently provided in training courses on interviewing, or feedback provided to interviewers by legal professionals may well be contributing to the poor quality statements elicited from child witnesses. As emphasised in previous papers (e.g., Powell 2005; Powell, Wright et al in press), collaboration between investigative interviewers and legal professionals is crucial, particularly in those jurisdictions where the investigative interviews can be used as witnesses' evidence-in-chief. However, unless feedback is delivered in a way that promotes active learning and recognises the boundaries of professionals' expertise in interview technique (i.e., those professionals giving *and* receiving feedback), the quality of witness statements is unlikely to improve.

Regular Evaluation of Interviewer Performance

The final essential component of training courses in the area of investigative interviewing of children is quality control evaluation. Without testing samples of performance output using objective measures, it cannot be concluded that the training has had a positive impact on interviewer performance. Trainees' perceptions of the effectiveness of courses or their knowledge of best-practice interviewing are not useful indicators of course effectiveness because there is no significant relationship between these factors and adherence to best-practice guidelines (Warren et al 1999; Wright et al 2007). Further, given that the impact of training interventions in most prior research has been short lived, trainee interviewer performance needs to be measured prior to, immediately after and well after the completion of the course, and if mock (simulated) interview paradigms are used, it needs to be established that they produce measures of performance that are generalisable to the field context (Gregory 2004).

Eliciting measures of interviewer performance has widespread benefits, not merely for refining and evaluating training procedures. On an organisational level, indicators of individual interviewers' performance is necessary for: effective selection and monitoring of individual interviewers, identifying training needs, assigning workloads, predicting case outcomes and benchmarking organisation capabilities (Powell, Wright et al in press). Thus trainers and organisations would benefit from the establishment of a quick, formal test (i.e., interview paradigm with objective scoring criteria) that can be reliably used to assess performance in the workplace. Standardised measures with good predictive validity are available for assessing interviewee's ability to provide accurate and detailed accounts of offences (e.g., Gudjonsson 1987; Scullin & Ceci 2001) and they are available for testing the competency of interviewers in other professional domains such as telemarketing, motivational interviewing, medical interviewing or hostage negotiation (Pierson et al 2007;

⁵ Overall, the results suggested that feedback effectiveness 'decreases as attention moves up the hierarchy closer to the self and away from the task' (Kluger & DeNisi 1996:254).

Pratt et al 2007; Squires et al 1991; Van Hasselt et al 2005). However, there is currently no empirically validated tool for assessing investigative interviewer capability. Criminal justice outcomes are not reliable measures of interviewer competency because they are subject to a variety of factors beyond the interviewer's skill in asking questions (e.g., degree of corroborative evidence; Davis et al 1999). Likewise interviews with actual witnesses (i.e., field interviews) may not be suitable for assessing performance on a routine basis because there are often considerable legal and practical restraints inhibiting immediate access to these (Powell 2002).

The basis of any reliable and valid 'test' of performance requires adherence to several principles (Ericsson & Lehmann 1996; Gregory 2004). Specifically, performance needs to: be consistent across a variety of measurement points (test-retest reliability), capture the types of challenges normally faced in the field (concurrent validity), predict individuals' performance in the field under comparable conditions (predictive validity) and be perceived by professionals as vivid and relevant to the field (face validity). While a brief measure of investigative interviewer performance is an achievable task, preliminary work suggests that mock-interview paradigms involving the use of trained actors and structured coding protocols provide useful yet crude assessment tools for measuring adherence to best-practice interview guidelines (Cavezza 2008). It would be inappropriate at present to use them (or any other non-validated tool) to provide fine-tuned discrimination between interviewers, or to predict future behaviour in the field setting. Further research in this area is urgently warranted.

Conclusion

This review has illustrated that the design and delivery of interviewer training is a highly complex task. To be effective in the long term, training needs to be continuous (not merely contained to a 2-3 week training program), it needs to be tailored to individuals' skill level and be consistent with the scientific eyewitness memory and interviewer training research. The critical elements of interviewer training courses include: (i) the establishment of key principles or beliefs that underpin effective interviewing, (ii) the adoption of an interview framework that maximises narrative detail, (iii) clear instruction in relation to the application of the interview framework, (iv) effective ongoing practice, (v) expert feedback and (vi) regular evaluation of interviewer performance. While the impact of these elements has been established directly, their importance is also indicated by evaluation research from across the globe (e.g., Burton et al 2006; Clarke & Milne 2001; McConachy 2002; Richards et al 2007; Schollum et al 2006) identifying the absence of these elements (in particular, inadequate ongoing practice, feedback and quality control evaluation) in jurisdictions where interviewer competency is acknowledged to be a problem.

To produce training outcomes that are commensurate with organisations' investments, consideration must be given to the elements identified in this article as well as the high level of expertise required to implement these elements effectively. One of the current barriers to implementing these elements within Australia, for example, is that police and human service organisations in each state and territory are *independently* responsible for writing, coordinating, delivering and evaluating their own interview training programs and for setting the benchmark of what constitutes best-practice. Training coordinators, assessors and instructors are usually assigned from within organisations, are rotated regularly, and have little expert knowledge of the eyewitness memory, expertise and human learning literature. While some organisations recruit the assistance of external consultants with expertise in

interviewing, their input is typically limited to the delivery of a single lecture or workshop in interview technique due to limited budgets and availability of such experts (the majority of training budgets are currently spent on travel, accommodation and other costs associated with the abstraction of large numbers of trainee interviewers into the classroom).

Given the highly specialised nature of interviewing, there is strong argument for the development of a national curriculum or protocol dictating what constitutes an appropriate interviewer training program and how training delivery should be assessed, evaluated and accredited. Legislation relating to the use of investigative interviews and the admissibility of interview evidence differs across jurisdictions, but core interview techniques do not. Further, given the limited number of experts in this area, and the proven effectiveness of distance learning and on-line training technologies in imparting knowledge of procedures as well as practical skills such as the use of open-ended questions (Head et al 2002; HM Inspectorate of Constabulary 1999; Powell, Skouteris et al 2008; Powell & Wright in press) there is also strong argument for centralised delivery of components of training programs as well. If a National Interview Training Centre was staffed appropriately and supported by a range of organisations across Australia, this centre could take on the responsibility for setting and maintaining standards in training delivery, performance evaluation and for coordinating research leading to the development of new improved training curriculum, services and resources. Further, the centre could provide a library of resources and services for use by organisations on a needs basis. Such resources could include educational videos, interview protocols, interview assessment tools, and self-administered (on-line) practical training exercises. Services could include the provision of trained actors to play the role of interviewees, expert instructors, and specialists who can stage practical exercises (either via face-to-face or using on-line and telecommunication technologies).

The urgent need for global reform in training is justified by the low reporting, prosecution, and conviction rates for sex offences against children (Victoria Law Reform Commission 2004). Improvement in the competency of investigative interviewers, however, would have widespread benefits well beyond the quality and usefulness of child witness statements. More consistent and competent standards in service delivery within police and human service organisations would improve job satisfaction and reduce the rapid burnout of workers (Wright et al 2006). It would enhance the status of these organisations by enabling them to be at the forefront of new training developments and innovative training technologies (HM Inspectorate of Constabulary 1999). Further, widespread acknowledgement of the specialised nature of forensic interviewing would lead to greater investment in quality training among other professional groups who interview children (e.g., lawyers, doctors, psychologists) as well. While the functions of investigative interviews may differ across jurisdictions and professional groups (see Hoyano & Keenan 2007 for review), the *core skills* in eliciting accurate, detailed and complete accounts of events or situations from children or adults are the same irrespective of the professional or interviewee group or the context in which the interview is delivered.

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