USING THE 'COGNITIVE INTERVIEW' TECHNIQUE TO INCREASE THE ACCURACY OF EWT

Introduction

Recently, psychologists have begun to evaluate police interview techniques, and have found that British police officers have little formal training in the interviewing of witnesses, and that they are often unaware of the shortcomings in their interview techniques. Officers typically aim to elicit descriptions of gender, height, age, dress, and so on. They ask for information which seems immediately useful, rather than accessing information which may be useful later on. Standard police interviewing techniques may not be the best way to get the maximum amount of useful information from a witness.

One memory retrieval technique that tries to elicit more accurate information from eyewitnesses is the **Cognitive Interview**. Developed by **Geiselman (1988)**, this technique is now widely used by police forces in Britain and the USA.

How can the 'Cognitive Interview' improve the accuracy of EWT?

The Cognitive Interview is based on **Tulving's encoding-specificity principle**. This says that recall will be better if the same cues are present during recall as were present during the original learning. This is called **cue-dependent recall.** This suggests that if we learn material in a particular place, we will remember it better if we try to recall it in the same place. There is evidence to suggest that students do perform better if they are tested in the room in which they were taught, and it is even helpful to imagine that we are in that place when we try to recall material.

Research also suggests that we remember things better if we are in the same **physiological state** as when we encoded them. This is called **state-dependent learning**. For example, if people encode material under the influence of alcohol, recall is better when the intoxicated state is re-created compared with recall in a non-intoxicated sate. Similarly, some research has shown that people remember things better when they are in the same **mood** or **emotional state** as they were when the information was encoded.

The four main features (or instructions) of the cognitive interview technique are:

(1) Reinstate the context: Witnesses are encouraged to put themselves 'back at the scene' (e.g. how they *felt*, what they were thinking, etc.

(2) Report everything: Witnesses are encouraged to recall all the details they can remember, even if they believe them to be trivial

(3) Recall in a different order: Witnesses are told to try and remember the event from the end to the beginning, rather than from the beginning to the end. Alternatively, they may be asked to recall from some specific point (e.g. the middle)

(4): Recall from a changed perspective: Witnesses are asked to imagine the event from somebody else's perspective, and 'see' the event as this other person would have seen it

EVALUATION: Strengths and weaknesses of the 'Cognitive Interview'

Geiselman tested the effectiveness of the Cognitive Interview technique by comparing it with standard police interviews. 89 students were shown police training videos. They were then interviewed 48 hrs later by police officers using standard interview procedures or the Cognitive Interview. The measured the number of correct answers given, the number of incorrect answers given, and the number of confabulated (made up) answers given. The following results were obtained:

In terms of the amount of *correct* and *incorrect* information recalled, the cognitive technique compares very favourably with standard techniques:

	Standard Interview	Cognitive Interview
Accurate info.	29.4	41.5
Inaccurate info.	6.1	7.3
Confabulated info.	0.4	0.7

The amount of information correctly recalled was significantly greater with the Cognitive Interview. Although the amount of incorrect and

confabulated was greater with the Cognitive Interview, this difference was not significant. So, whilst there is a trade of between correct and incorrect/confabulated information, it is heavily in favour of correct information, suggesting that the Cognitive Interview is away of improving the accuracy of eyewitness testimony. Note, though, that this study used Another word of caution the participants who took part in the study were university students, which raises questions about population validity and generalisation of the findings.

A revised version of the cognitive interview, the **Enhanced Cognitive Interview** has been developed by **Fisher** *et al.* **(1987).** This encourages interviewers to use open-ended questions (e.g. 'What did the suspect do next?') rather than fixed-choice questions which often result in very short answers (e.g. 'Did the suspect walk or run?' Answer: 'He ran.'). Interviewers are also encouraged to follow the witness's train of thought. For example, if a witness remembered a detail 'out of sequence', s/he should be questioned about that detail there and then rather than waiting for its 'proper place' in the sequence of events to come round.

The Miami police have been trained in this method, and have reported a 46% increase in the number of details reported by eyewitnesses. Where additional evidence was available to assess their statements, it appeared that 90% of the reported details were correct (**Fisher** *et al.***, 1990**). The Enhanced Cognitive Interview has also been shown to be superior to the basic cognitive interview in laboratory studies, although the 45 % increase in correct details was accompanied by a 28% increase in *incorrect* details.

Police reconstructions are used for crimes such as murder and robbery, and in cases of missing persons. In cases of robbery, reconstructions are filmed for TV programmes such as *Crimewatch*. In murder cases, a person dressed in similar clothes to the victim retraces the victim's last known movements. This usually takes place a week later, in the same place and at the same time.

The aim of reconstructions is twofold. First, to obtain eyewitnesses who have not yet come forward. Second, to 'jog the memory' of eyewitnesses who have come forward - they are invited to attend the reconstruction. The hope is that they will remember further details of the victim's movements, and, in particular, any other people who were in the vicinity. The person representing the victim is accompanied by police officers who question people along the route.

Crimewatch reconstructions are based on the idea of **cue-dependent recall**. In the above example, the cues are similar clothes, time and place. As we have seen, recall is more likely when the context at encoding matches the context at retrieval. Reconstructions sometimes produce useful information. However, as we have seen, EWT is often inaccurate when people are reporting on actual events. A reconstruction, which does not exactly mirror the real event, may lead to further inaccuracies. In particular, it might lead to **confabulation** (i.e. adding false detail to the memory of an event).