Florida International University

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Doctoral Dissertation Defense

Abstract

Eliciting a Perpetrator Description Using the Cognitive Interview:
Influences on Investigative Utility

by

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The Cognitive Interview (CI) has been shown in over one hundred studies to enhance eyewitness recall. However, no study has explored whether the CI helps police do their job better. The current study was the first to test the practical value of the CI in a criminal investigation, testing participants’ performance on key police tasks using either a perpetrator description elicited from a CI or from a standard police interview (SI).

Student witnesses were exposed to a simulated robbery and were then interviewed using either a CI or an SI to elicit a description of the robber. In Experiment 1, a sample of student participants (N=320) completed two investigative tasks using the description of the robber: (a) identifying the perpetrator from a group of ten potential suspect photographs; and (b) allocating hours among the top three potential suspects based on who should be the focus of the police’s time (i.e., investigative resources). Participants also subjectively assessed each descriptor’s value in terms of completing the tasks. Presentation methods to enhance the utility of the CI were also tested. Relative to the SI, the CI resulted in a near-30% increase in accurately identifying the perpetrator as a suspect. Also, significantly more hours were allocated toward investigating the perpetrator using the CI as compared with the SI. Participants did not, however, subjectively value CI descriptions more than SI descriptions; and, the CI’s utility was not enhanced by the presentation methods tested.

Experiment 2 sought to reproduce and generalize the CI’s effect on investigative utility by using student participants (N=67) and police officers (N=71). As in Experiment 1, the CI significantly improved investigative performance in accurately identifying the perpetrator as a suspect, and in allocating resources toward investigating the perpetrator. Police and students did not significantly differ in their performance of investigative tasks or in their CI description utility ratings.

The current study was the first to find that the CI can be properly used by police in a criminal investigation. Investigating the actual perpetrator as opposed to an innocent suspect is likely to have a domino effect on subsequent phases of an investigation.

Date: October 18, 2017
Time: 10:30am
Place: Modesto A. Maidique Campus, DM 258

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