



Using Science to Improve the Practice of Interviewing and Interrogation

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During the “War on Terror,” the Central Intelligence Agency’s (CIA’s) operations subjected hundreds of suspected terrorists to harsh interrogation techniques, which were often criticized as constituting torture.

The release of the U.S. Senate Intelligence Committee’s report on the detention and interrogation program highlighted the use of so-called enhanced interrogation to elicit information. While proponents claim these methods were necessary to compel uncooperative detainees to divulge important information, critical analysis fails to justify their use.

A 2006 Intelligence Science Board report concluded that the U.S. government’s interrogation practices were largely devoid of any scientific validity.¹ In fact, the last significant investment in research on interrogation practices occurred more than 50 years ago. Interrogation tactics used today by law enforcement, military, and intelligence staff are, instead, grounded in the experience of investigators who train others.

For the past five years, the U.S. government, through its High Value Detainee Interrogation Group (HIG), has funded a significant science program that is identifying and testing the most effective means of acquiring intelligence and gaining cooperation from interviewees.

The law enforcement community in the United States and overseas is now playing a

key role in supporting and developing this new science.

The HIG was created by U.S. President Obama in 2010. It is an interagency group comprising practitioners from the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the CIA, and the Defense Intelligence Agency. The operational mission of the HIG is to conduct interrogations of high-value terrorism suspects. In addition, the HIG was tasked with developing a research program to assess the effectiveness of current interrogation practices and to develop novel, science-based methods.

Today, a team of internationally renowned psychologists from the United States, Sweden, the United Kingdom, Australia, Southeast Asia, South Africa, and the Middle East are doing exactly that in collaboration with the law enforcement community.

In working to develop new methods of intelligence interviewing, the research team—with the oversight of Human Subjects Review Committees that protect the rights and welfare of study participants—has produced more than 60 studies, including experimental research, interviews, surveys of interrogation professionals, and systematic analysis of criminal and counterterrorist interrogation interviews. Once new methods are developed they are scientifically compared with existing practices at U.S. government interrogation training facilities.

This research program has assessed the importance of social relationships, active listening, and personal rapport in eliciting information. The researchers have developed methods that enhance memory recall and evaluate strategic questioning tactics that can help an interviewer judge whether a suspect is telling the truth or not. They have also assessed the impact of the interview context (e.g., the set up of the interview room) and the role of culture and language, including the influence of interpreters.

The team of psychologists is clearly able to show that interview strategies based on building rapport and seeking to understand a suspect’s motivation to cooperate are more effective than accusatory practices that attempt to raise anxiety levels, fabricate evidence, and minimize a suspect’s perception of their own culpability.

The researchers have conducted surveys of intelligence and law enforcement interrogators, interviewers, and debriefers to learn their views regarding the effectiveness of interrogative approaches. The HIG is also carrying out in-depth interviews of U.S. military and intelligence interrogators with high-value detainee experience. And, in order to provide an objective assessment of what actually happens in an intelligence interview, researchers have analyzed videotaped interrogations from major crimes





cases in the United States and counterterrorism cases in the United Kingdom.

These studies offer an unprecedented perspective on the challenges, successes, and mediators of overcoming resistance and collecting important information from non-cooperative sources. This scientific testing has also provided a new framework for interrogation training.

HIG researchers are now working with the U.S. Air Force Office of Special Investigations and a major civilian law enforcement agency to introduce science-based methods into their formal training programs and to assess their effectiveness.

By advancing the science and practice of intelligence interviewing, the law enforcement community is better able to evaluate what makes a good interviewer, to consider new approaches to gaining information from criminals and terror suspects, and to use innovative methods to detect deception.

And so, just as advances in basic and translational research in medicine have helped to improve health care in the United States, this HIG-sponsored research in the behavioral sciences is enabling law enforcement, military and intelligence personnel to incorporate the latest research to enhance the practice of interviewing and interrogation.

This scientific validation, which results in new approaches that enable interviewers to do their highly skilled and complex work even better, could not be achieved without the support of our forward-thinking law enforcement agencies.

Supporting the HIG research program is a committee that provides a forum for discussions among policy makers, professional associations, science communities, and non-governmental organizations such as human rights and bioethics communities and practitioners. The chair of this group is the IACP's IMPACT Executive Committee vice-chair, Mark Fallon, who formally served as the FLETC Assistant Director, NCIS Deputy Assistant Director, and NCIS Academy Director. He said,

Science will not translate for the practitioner community without measurement. Once we know how to measure an interrogation's success and failure, and interviewer performance, we can assess what we are doing and what we need to do better.

This research program not only gives practitioners access to the latest discoveries but focuses on helping experts in the field to incorporate these discoveries into new and even more effective interrogation methods.² ❖

Notes:

¹Robert Fein et al., *Educating Information Interrogation: Science and Art Foundations for the Future* (Washington, D.C.: National Defense Intelligence Council, 2006), <http://www1.umdn.edu/humanrts/OathBetrayed/Intelligence%20Science%20Board%202006.pdf> (accessed July 23, 2015).

²Christian Meissner, Susan Brandon, and Mark Fallon, *Interrogation: Expanding the Frontiers of Research and Practice?* (High Value Detainee Interrogation Group, 2015), 45, <http://fliphtml5.com/xaga/cwpt> (accessed July 23, 2015).

A new publication, *Interrogation: Expanding the Frontiers of Research and Practice*, shares findings with interrogation professionals, U.S. government trainers, and the public.