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Current Directions in Psychological Science 2011 20: 33
DOI: 10.1177/0963721410396824

The online version of this article can be found at:
http://cdp.sagepub.com/content/20/1/33
Suspect Interviews and False Confessions

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Abstract
In this article, we review two influential methods of police interviewing practice and their associations with false confessions. These are the Reid technique, which is commonly used by police forces in the United States, and the PEACE model, which is routinely used in the United Kingdom. Several authors have recently expressed concerns about the guilt-presumptive and confrontational aspects of the Reid technique and its association with false confessions and recommend that it be replaced by the PEACE model. Anecdotal case studies and DNA exonerations have shown that false confessions are more common than previously thought and are typically associated with two main causes: manipulative/coercive interrogation techniques and suspects’ vulnerabilities in interviews. The main challenge for the future is to develop interview techniques that maximize the number of noncoerced true confessions while minimizing the rate of false confessions. In the meantime, the electronic recording of police interviews, which provides invaluable transparency and accountability, is the single best protection against police-induced false confessions.

Keywords
police interviews, false confessions, Reid technique, PEACE model

Police interviewing is best conceptualized as a dynamic and interactive social process, the outcome of which is influenced by a number of factors (e.g., nature of the interrogation, age and motivation of suspect, intelligence, mental health, personality, and access to legal advice). The principal objective of police questioning—whether interviewing witnesses, victims, or suspects—is to gather relevant information about a suspected or reported crime. In the interests of fairness and justice, it is important that the information elicited is accurate (i.e., truthful and precise), complete, coherent, and credible and that it is obtained fairly and meets legal criteria for evidential purposes.

The purpose of this article is to compare and contrast, within the context of false confessions, two police interview techniques: the Reid technique and the PEACE model, used in the United States and United Kingdom, respectively.

Police Interviews

Interviewing in the United States

Leo (2008) points out that, contrary to popular myths of the American justice system, “the goal of police interrogation is not necessarily to determine the truth” (p. 23). Leo discusses the police interviewers’ focus on obtaining a confession from suspects rather than on truth or fact finding. This focus on confessions has a long history, and obtaining a confession still remains an important goal of the psychologically oriented Reid technique (named after one of the original authors) that replaced the “third degree” (i.e., the use of physical force during interrogation, deprivation of food and sleep) in the United States. The Reid technique is the most popular and frequently used police interview technique in the United States (Inbau, Reid, Buckley, & Jayne, 2001). It encourages interviewers to use a two-stage process. The first stage is a nonaccusatory interview (also known as a behavioral analysis interview, or BAI), in which general background information about the suspect is obtained, rapport and trust are built, and a determination is made about whether or not the suspect is lying about the offense. If the suspect is judged to be lying, then the interview progresses to a nine-step accusatory approach, typically referred to as “interrogation” (Inbau et al., 2001). In this article, we use the term interview to encompass both of the Reid technique stages. Masip, Herrero, Garrido, and Barba (2010) have identified fundamental problems with the BAI (i.e., lack of...
of grounding in science, unfounded commonsense beliefs, and inaccurate recommendations.

Kassin and Gudjonsson (2004) argue that the nine-step Reid technique can be reduced to three general phases: “custody and isolation” (i.e., the suspect is detained and isolated, anxiety and uncertainty are generated in order to weaken resistance), “confrontation” (i.e., the suspect’s guilt is assumed and he or she is confronted with alleged incriminating evidence that may or may not be genuine; denials are rejected, even if they happen to be true, and the consequence of continued denial is emphasized), and “minimization” (i.e., the interrogator tries to gain the suspect’s trust and provides face-saving excuses for the crime, including suggesting that it was an accident or that the victim deserved it).

It is generally accepted that the Reid technique is effective in breaking down denial and resistance and eliciting confessions. The authors of the technique claim an 80% confession rate and state that, of the remaining 20%, “a small percentage of them could have been innocent” (i.e., they presume that a very high percentage of suspects they interrogate are guilty of the suspected offense; Inbau et al., 2001, p. 364). This claim of success has not been scientifically verified, and serious concerns about the technique’s association with false confessions have been raised (Kassin, 1997). In view of this, some authors (Bull & Soukara, 2010; Meissner & Lassiter, 2010; Snook, Eastwood, Stinson, Tedeschini, & House, 2010) have recently recommended that the guilt-presumptive and confrontational processes inherent in the Reid technique should be replaced by a noncoercive technique such as the PEACE model used in the United Kingdom. Importantly, the inherently deceptive and manipulative nature of the Reid technique (e.g., presentation of false evidence, minimization of the offense) raises important ethical/professional issues and concerns about its political legitimacy in a modern liberal society (Skerker, 2010). Skerker discusses three possible negative consequences of the Reid technique: risk of false confession, harm to police—community relations, and professional corruption of police interviewers. However, he does not consider these concerns “to be sufficient to rule out these interrogations on prudential grounds” (p. 114), provided interrogators are well trained and monitored and interviews are video recorded and corroborated.

**Interviewing in the United Kingdom**

The development of a formal police interview training approach in the United Kingdom began in the early 1990s following some landmark cases of miscarriage of justice involving confession evidence in which police interviewing and the courts came under close scrutiny and criticism (Gudjonsson, 2003). The authorities in England and Wales were quick to respond; they set up two Royal Commissions, which have initiated fundamental changes in laws and procedures, including those governing police interviews.

The PEACE model (PEACE is an acronym for Preparation and Planning, Engage and Explain, Account and Clarification, Closure, and Evaluation) has been in continuous use in the United Kingdom since 1993, when it was rolled out as part of a national training package for police officers. It is now being employed in many countries around the world, including New Zealand and Norway (Bull & Soukara, 2010). The PEACE model was developed out of sound psychological principles—following valuable collaborative work between academics, psychologists, police practitioners, and lawyers—and was intended to take into account vulnerabilities of some interviewees, with the aim to minimize the risk of false confession (Shawyer, Milne, & Bull, 2009). The initial planning and preparation stages require the interviewer to be well prepared for the interview, including possessing good knowledge about the case and the interviewee. The remaining phases involve an interview process, its closure, and its evaluation. The focus centers on fairness, openness, workability, accountability, and fact (truth) finding rather than merely obtaining a confession. Leading questions, heavy pressure, and psychological manipulation are avoided, thereby potentially reducing the risk of false confession while still producing true confessions (Shawyer et al., 2009).

Unlike their American counterparts, U.K. police interviewers are not allowed to lie to suspects or present them with false evidence in order to obtain a confession, further reducing the likelihood of a false confession (Kassin et al., 2010). In addition, the entire interview process in all interviews in England and Wales is electronically recorded. Initial reports on the PEACE model were positive, although the first major review of progress identified concerns in relation to communication skills, training and supervision, and the quality of interviews with witnesses (Clarke & Milne, 2001). To improve interview training and supervision, Griffiths and Milne (2006) recommend a “five-tier” approach to reflect introductory, intermediary, and advanced interviewing skills training, as well as training in supervision and coordination of interviews in serious and complex cases.

Bull and Soukara (2010) point out that very few studies have actually investigated what happens during police interviews and that even fewer studies have investigated the relationship between police interview tactics and suspects’ responses and behavior. Notable exceptions with regard to the latter are the studies by Leo (1996) in the United States and by us (Pearse & Gudjonsson, 1996, 1999) in the United Kingdom.

In an early study following the introduction of the PEACE model, we (Pearse & Gudjonsson, 1996) found no evidence of intrusive tactics or challenges by police; but in the later study of more serious criminal cases, we (Pearse & Gudjonsson, 1999) found that some police interviewers in the United Kingdom resorted to aspects of the American-style Reid technique in order to break down resistance in serious cases. The latter typically resulted in unreliable and in some instances false confessions (Gudjonsson, 2003). In more recent studies, Bull and Soukara (2010) discovered that police interviewers were generally complying with the PEACE model and that the manipulative and coercive techniques we (Pearse & Gudjonsson, 1999) identified were not present. However, Bull and Soukara found no clear relationship between the types of tactics used and confessions, although the researchers found that, unlike...
some other U.K. studies, confessions often did not occur at
the beginning of the interview and that when confessions were
made, there had been more confrontation and greater pressure
in the police interview. The current authors are not aware of
any reported real-life cases of false confession involving the
PEACE model, but this has not been empirically investigated
(Bull & Soukara, 2010). It is important to note that the
PEACE model is still producing a high rate of confessions
(Bull & Soukara, 2010; Gudjonsson, 2003).

Collaborative practice and research into police interviews
continues in the United Kingdom. As a result, training for police
officers has become more clearly defined, with a structure
designed to better reflect an officer’s career development that is
consistent with published national standards; new legislation
includes specific witness categories with more specific proce-
dures, making treatment of witnesses much more formal and bet-
ter regulated; and since September 2001, there has been a
noticeable increase in the numbers of terrorist suspects detained
by U.K. police forces. One of the real tests of an effective model
is its ability to evolve and adapt to its changing environment.
For example, The Garda Síochána, the police service of the Irish
Republic, has designed a model with the flexibility to adapt to the
motivation and characteristics of interviewees rather than to their
status as a witness, suspect, or victim. Thus, the interviewing offi-
cer needs to be adaptable enough to accommodate both coopera-
tive and uncooperative individuals and vulnerable witnesses or
suspects. This departure from the more traditional training
approach is worthy of further review and evaluation. The PEACE
model and the adapted Irish model enable the principles of the
cognitive interview technique to be included for enhancing recol-
clection among cooperative suspects (Fisher & Perez, 2007).

False Confessions

Most people find it unthinkable that anybody would confess or
plead guilty to a serious crime of which they were innocent, but
people do. For example, there have been more than 240 individ-
uals proven innocent through DNA evidence in the United States
since 1989, when the first DNA-exoneration case occurred, and
of those, between 15% and 20% involved false confessions to
serious crimes, such as murder or rape (Kassin et al., 2010).
Kassin and Gudjonsson (2004) point out that this is likely to rep-
resent only the “tip of the iceberg,” because murder and rape
are the most likely crimes to leave DNA evidence available for
exoneration. The DNA-exoneration cases focus almost exclu-
sively on police-induced false confessions. Interestingly, after
one false confession case in the United Kingdom, the resultant
national inquiry led to radical new legislation requiring elec-
tronic recording of interviews and improved police training (see
Gudjonsson, 2003 for details of the “Confait Case”). Regretta-
ibly, no such strategic response appears to be forthcoming from
the United States despite alarming recent evidence about the
frequency of false confessions.

Field studies comprise anecdotal case histories, including
DNA exonerations, and surveys of prisoners, suspects at police
stations, mentally disordered patients, and community samples
from several countries in Europe (Gudjonsson, 2010b). The
community surveys among young people at the higher levels
of mandatory education inform us that, of those interviewed
by police as suspects, the base rate of guilt (i.e., the proportion
of those who committed the offense, admitting it to police)
ranges between 44% and 67% in different countries, with the
highest rates of guilt (i.e., participants claiming to have com-
mitted the offense about which they were interrogated) being
consistently reported in Icelandic samples (Gudjonsson,
2010b). In terms of vulnerabilities, history of substance misuse
and victimization are commonly associated with false confession
among young people (Gudjonsson, Sigurdsson, & Sigfusdottir,
2009). The base rate of guilt in real-life (field) cases of police
interviews is unknown and is likely to vary across countries,
jurisdictions, and type of crime being investigated. Young age,
mental disorders, suggestibility, compliance, and manipula-
tive police techniques are commonly thought to be associated
with false confessions (Kassin et al., 2010). These types of
vulnerabilities are best conceptualized as potential risk
factors rather than as definitive markers of unreliability (i.e.,
unsafe confessions; Gudjonsson, 2010a).

It is generally accepted within the psychological community
that false confessions fall into distinct types: voluntary or
police induced (Kassin et al., 2010). Voluntary false confes-
sions typically result from attention-seeking behavior; a wish
for notoriety; protecting the real perpetrator (e.g., a peer, a part-
tner); or underlying psychopathology, such as need for punish-
ment or revenge or an inability to distinguish what is real and
what is a fantasy. Police-induced false confessions, according
to the influential Kassin and Wrightsman (1985) conceptual
framework, can be further broken down into two distinct types:
compliant or internalized. The former involves the interviewee
not being able to cope with the custodial and interrogative pres-
ures and giving a knowingly false confession in order to
escape from the immediate stress of the situation. Internalized
false confessions are more psychologically sophisticated and
typically result from subtle manipulation of the interviewee’s
belief in their guilt (e.g., being persuaded that there is incontro-
vertible evidence of their involvement in the crime even if the
suspect has no recollection of committing it).

The two types of police-induced false confessions are seen as
resulting from three types of error: misclassification error (i.e.,
the police investigator mistakenly classifies an innocent person
as being a guilty suspect), coercion error (i.e., firmly believing
in the suspect’s guilt, the interviewer will apply coercive tactics
consisting of threats and/or inducements to confess), and con-
tamination error (i.e., the police either deliberately or inadver-
tently provide the suspect with crime-related detail that is
subsequently presented in court as knowledge that must have
come from the real offender; Leo & Drizin, 2010).

False confessions: The Reid technique versus the PEACE model

The extent to which the Reid technique and the PEACE model
elicit false confessions is unknown. Since, unlike the Reid
In the United Kingdom, academics and clinical practitioners have worked more collaboratively with police investigators than have their U.S. counterparts in developing and implementing police interview training and conducting research into false confessions (Gudjonsson, 2003). Importantly, Meissner, Hartwig, and Russano (2010) call for more positive collaborative work between academics and police practitioners in the United States. The main challenge for the future is to develop transparent and accountable interview techniques that maximize the number of noncoerced true confessions while minimizing the rate of false confessions.

**Recommended Reading**


**Declaration of Conflicting Interests**

The authors declared that they had no conflicts of interest with respect to their authorship or the publication of this article.

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