



Information-gathering method elicits true confessions

This user abstract presents the following Campbell systematic review: Meissner CA, Redlich A., Bhatt S, Brandon, S. Interview and interrogation methods and their effects on true and false confessions. Campbell Systematic Reviews 2012:13. DOI: 10.4073.

Police interrogations may result in false confessions, as has been documented in many countries. Findings from this systematic review indicate that the information-gathering method of questioning suspects increases the chance of getting a true confession and reduces the chance of forcing a false confession.

1.1 INTERROGATION METHODS IN POLICE INVESTIGATIONS

The interrogation of suspects can be very important to securing convictions of guilty parties and freeing the innocent. There are two general methods of questioning suspects: information-gathering and accusatorial. The information-gathering approach is used in the United Kingdom, New Zealand, Australia, and Western Europe. It is characterized by rapport-building, truth-seeking, and active listening. The accusatorial approach is used primarily in the United States and Canada. It is characterized by accusation, confrontation, psychological manipulation, and the disallowing of denials. There is much controversy over which method is more effective.

1.2 CONFESSIONS IN CONTEXT

The results of this systematic review indicate that both accusatorial and information-gathering methods of interrogation are effective tools for obtaining confessions in a real-world context. Importantly, studies of real-life contexts do not separate the outcomes according to innocent and guilty suspects. In other words, the outcome measured is the number of confessions. No analysis is provided on how many are true and false.

In experimental contexts, results indicate that both methods increase the odds of obtaining a true confession from a guilty participant. When compared with a control condition, however, the accusatorial method also increases the likelihood of inducing innocent participants to make a confession. The information gathering-method, on the other hand, reduces the chance of obtaining false confessions.

1.3 FACTS ABOUT THE SYSTEMATIC REVIEW

The aim of this review was to examine the impact of accusatorial versus information-gathering approaches on the elicitation of confessions. The authors conducted two meta-analytic reviews that included: 1) observational and quasi-experimental field studies of actual suspects in which the guilt/innocence of the suspect was unknown, and; 2) experimental, laboratory-based studies in which the guilt/innocence of the suspect was known.

Five field studies and 12 experimental studies from the USA (12), UK (4) and Canada (1) were identified. The field studies included 1) at least one coded and quantified interviewing/interrogation method and 2) data on confession outcomes tied to the questioning style. All included experimental studies involved 1) at least two distinct interviewing styles (e.g., direct questioning and accusatorial approach) and 2) sufficient data on true and/or false confession outcomes.

The findings suggest the superiority of information-gathering methods in the interrogative context. Given that the number of participants in these studies is relatively small, these findings should be interpreted with caution.

1.4 ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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