



The Role of Forensic Interviewing in Criminal Investigations

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DESCRIPTION

Forensic interviewing is a structured method of gathering information from individuals, particularly victims, witnesses, or suspects, in legal contexts, with the primary objective of eliciting accurate and reliable information while minimizing harm or retraumatization. Rooted in both psychological science and legal principles, forensic interviewing has evolved as a critical component in criminal investigations, especially those involving vulnerable populations such as children, individuals with cognitive impairments, and trauma survivors.

The success of a forensic interview largely depends on the interviewer's ability to establish rapport, maintain neutrality, and use non-suggestive techniques that support memory retrieval. Research has shown that traditional interrogation techniques, which may include coercion or leading questions, can produce false confessions or distorted recollections, particularly among impressionable individuals. In contrast, forensic interviewing emphasizes cognitive and developmental appropriateness, ensuring that questions are open-ended, specific, and free from assumptions or bias.

One widely adopted model in forensic interviewing is the NICHD (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development) protocol. This method is particularly effective in interviews with children and incorporates a phased approach, beginning with rapport-building and moving towards free-recall questions, followed by focused prompts if necessary. By allowing the interviewee to narrate events in their own words without interruption, the NICHD protocol reduces the risk of memory contamination and enhances the accuracy of disclosures. Interviewers trained in such protocols are taught to remain patient, attentive, and emotionally neutral, creating a safe space for communication.

Cognitive interviewing techniques are another foundation of forensic interviewing, particularly in adult populations. These strategies aim to enhance the quantity and quality of memory recall by tapping into the cognitive processes associated with memory encoding and retrieval. Techniques such as context

reinstatement, varied recall, and encouraging multiple perspectives can help interviewee's access different memory cues and provide richer details. However, the cognitive demands of such interviews may not suit all individuals, requiring interviewers to assess cognitive and emotional readiness beforehand.

An important ethical concern in forensic interviewing is the potential for suggestibility, particularly in cases involving children or trauma survivors. Suggestibility refers to the extent to which individuals' memories and responses can be influenced by external cues, including the interviewer's tone, wording, or demeanor. To mitigate this, interviewers must undergo rigorous training and be evaluated for adherence to best practices. Moreover, interviews are often audio or video recorded to ensure transparency, facilitate review, and protect both the interviewee and interviewer from allegations of misconduct.

Forensic interviews play an essential role not only in criminal investigations but also in family court proceedings, asylum cases, and mental health assessments. In child protection cases, for instance, the forensic interview may serve as the foundation for determining custody, visitation rights, or the need for protective services. Given the high stakes involved, interdisciplinary collaboration between psychologists, law enforcement personnel, and legal professionals is vital to ensure that interview outcomes are both evidentially robust and ethically sound.

The effectiveness of a forensic interview can be significantly compromised if not conducted with sensitivity to cultural, linguistic, and psychological factors. Cultural competence, trauma-informed care, and the ability to adapt questioning styles are increasingly recognized as essential skills in this domain. Interviewers must remain attuned to how cultural backgrounds influence communication styles, nonverbal behavior, and perceptions of authority.

CONCLUSION

As forensic psychology continues to evolve, so too must the methodologies employed in forensic interviewing. Advances in

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neuroscience, trauma psychology, and communication science continue to inform best practices. The incorporation of virtual platforms and AI-assisted tools also holds promise but must be cautiously integrated to preserve the human-Centered ethos of

the interview process. Ultimately, forensic interviewing is not merely a technique but a disciplined practice grounded in empathy, scientific integrity, and a commitment to justice.