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The GIS-model: A Dutch approach to gather information in suspect interviews

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Abstract

This article describes the development and the underlying principles of the General Interview Strategy (GIS); a strategy used, during the last decades, by the Dutch police to interview suspects. First the current situation concerning suspect interviewing in the Netherlands is discussed. Secondly, a description is given of an experiment the Police Academy of the Netherlands conducted in 1989. This experiment stands at the cradle of the GIS. Next an account is given for the four underlying principles of the GIS in the experiment: (i) Make use of internal pressure, (ii) Try to minimize eventual reluctance to provide an account, (iii) Rule out alternatives, (iv) Challenge the account. These principles are compared to findings from research within the information-gathering paradigm. The article ends with some future challenges.

Keywords: *investigative; interview; principles; general; GIS.*

Introduction

Well, his flashy sports car was his pride, he told the police. He had worked hard for it and neighbours would warn him when someone came too close to its parking space. He kept the spare keys in a drawer, only accessible to the cleaning lady. Only once a friend had made a short drive in it. This man returned the keys claiming the fast car was monstrous. While taking the enthusiasm about his car, this highly educated murder suspect did not realise the police was gathering useful information for building up evidence.

In an overview of how knowledge about effective suspect interviewing has developed over the past three decades Bull (2014) emphasises (and discusses) that, "The successful interviewing of guilty suspects is a skilled combination of: (i) avoidance of the use of 'negative feedback' (e.g.

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repeatedly accusing a person of lying), and; (ii) appropriate revelation of the incriminating information". Although these two key points, as written down in such plain language, might appear to be straight forward enough (at least, for those familiar with the current paradigm of ethical, information-gathering interviewing), keeping them in mind while preparing or conducting a suspect interview is hard. In a situation with suspects who appear to be (overtly) lying during an interview, time and again; it can be hard to stay friendly, or at least neutral. We think every officer will be able to recall a situation where one got easily irritated because of someone overtly lying. Shepherd and Kite (1988) describe it as such: "If the interviewee is perceived being 'difficult', 'uncooperative' or 'cocky', there is a distinct risk of the officer's schema becoming distorted: the aim ... becomes one of maintaining face, of 'winning [instead of 'to seek the truth']".

Interviewing is seen as a highly complex cognitive task, both for the interviewer and interviewee, as Shepherd and Kite wrote down in 1988: "The interview requires a flexible and ongoing process of judgments and decisions based on these conversational and cognitive competencies". Deciding to give which information away at what moment and in what form is only one of the many decisions an interviewer has to take during an interview with a suspect. A well prepared and structured approach might facilitate this decision-making process, and, as such, contribute to the quality of the interview and the amount of reliable information gathered. In order to help Dutch police officers and detectives to prepare and conduct suspect interviews the Police Academy of the Netherlands has developed an interviewing framework. Since this framework may apply to (nearly) all suspect interviews, it received the name General Interviewing Strategy (GIS). In this article we will present and discuss this GIS-model as it is described in the Dutch investigative interviewing manual (Van Amelsvoort, Rispens, & Grolman, 2012). Van der Sleen (2009) has published about it in English a few years ago as well. First we will provide a short overview of suspect interviewing in the Netherlands, including some details about an experiment that preceded the forming of the GIS-model. Secondly, we will discuss the four principles of the GIS-model and the underlying assumptions. We will conclude with some final remarks. The GIS-approach always results in the use of an interview table. This table can be perceived as the toolbox for gathering the tools of the GIS-model and, as such, it might help the interviewer to work according to the four underlying principles. In Van Beek & Hoekendijk (2015; see this journal) an introduction is given to working with this interview table.

Investigative interviewing in The Netherlands

A suspect interview in the Netherlands can normally be divided in to three different stages (Van Amelsvoort, Rispens, & Grolman, 2012):

- opening the interview;
- conducting a person oriented interview;
- conducting a case oriented interview.

In *the opening stage*, the interviewer will explain to the suspect his or her legal rights, the procedures and the situation (e.g. whether the interview will be audio or audio-visually recorded, whether others like an advocate, interpreter or psychologist will be present). During *the person oriented interview* the interviewer tries to collect relevant personal information from the suspect. This might serve several goals like familiarizing the suspect with being questioned and getting to know the suspect. The topics referred to will preferably relate to the suspect's background, the crime and/or possible motives. During *the case oriented interview* the interviewer tries to collect

relevant information concerning the case. It is only for this third stage of the interview the GIS-model was developed. Being the backbone of suspect interviewing in the Netherlands, the GIS-model is incorporated in police education. All Dutch officers receive a basic training in the GIS. For detectives there is a more elaborate general training and for detectives with a wish to specialize in interviewing there's the curriculum of Professional Investigative Interviewing (PII)¹.

Dutch police education is heavily influenced by an improvement program for the public prosecution service, the National Institute of Forensics and the police (Public Prosecution Service, 2005). This program was the result of a review of a miscarriage of justice known as the Schiedammer Park Murder, in which part of the evidence was a false confession. The most important guidelines following from this program are that every detective receives a basic training in investigative interviewing. Also 5 out of every 1000 police officers should be trained in investigative interviewing at the highest level. Furthermore all interviews in a major case² should be prepared and in a plan. This plan should at least contain the aim of the interview, tactics to be used, information available for the interviewers at the start of the interview and the motivated choice of interviewers. Although the 2005 improvement program catalyzed the use of the GIS-model, since it fitted into the guidelines of the program and was part of the 'Utrecht approach'³ as well, its roots date back to 1989.

Development of the GIS

In this year the Police Academy conducted a small sampled, explorative field experiment, in order to develop a model for a new investigative interviewing education program (Van Amelsvoort, personal communication, February, 10, 2013⁴; Van der Sleen, personal communication, October, 30, 2012). The question to be answered was: what is it that makes good interviewers effective? In this, unfortunately never published, experiment four interviewers each conducted four interviews. This was part of a bottom-up approach: the researchers did not start an experiment to test a theory (top-down), but started an experiment to see whether it would provide theoretical insight.

The four participating interviewers were selected because of their reputation of being able to get a trustworthy account from suspects. Four training actors were selected to actually commit four (petty) 'crimes'. Their instruction was to really commit the asked for crime; they were informed it could bring them in some trouble, but would not result in a crime record. The crimes they each committed were the theft of money in a petrol station, of an outboard motor stalled in a barn, of a trailer wagon near the train station and of a camera in a hall way. All crimes were semi-prepared: the actors received instructions with information about the day the crime should take place, what item they had to steal and where this item could be found. The time of the day was a free choice for the actors, as was the choice of modus operandi. Without them being aware of this, their cars were prepared with a wired surveillance system in order to know exactly at what time they would arrive at the crime scene. The settings, e.g. where and when a (staged) witness should show up, were controlled for as far as possible. Therefore the researchers secretly observed the crime scenes.

¹ See politieacademie.nl/en for more information about police education in the Netherlands.

² Major cases are defined as: crimes where someone is killed and crimes nearly as severe, with no direct, clear signs of a very likely suspect. They have to be investigated by a so-called Team of Large-scale Action. In Dutch: Team Grootchalig Optreden (TGO).

³ The Utrecht approach refers to an interviewing training program developed in 1999 by the Police Academy for the Utrecht area police (De Vries, Personal communication, January, 28, 2014) and became in the years since a standard for the national education of detectives in investigative interviewing, since it was called 'a best practice' by the improvement program.

⁴ Van Amelsvoort gave us the scripts that were used and some raw material, like scoring lists. The tapes of the interviews appear to be lost.

In all cases, the researchers organised the actors who were arrested a day later by police officers that were not aware of the on-going experiment and, finally, interviewed by the participating detectives. Before the interview, the actors were instructed that it was their free choice to make a statement or to remain silent, to lie or to tell the truth. If they succeeded to 'get away with it', they earned a bonus on their wages. The interviewers all received the same start information. They were given sufficient time to prepare the interview and were free in their choice of strategy.

This design resulted in sixteen audio-visually recorded interviews. These were scored by three trained psychologists on interviewer behaviour. Effective interview behaviour, operationalized in terms of collecting information in line with the 'ground truth' and without missing information or collecting false information, appeared to be related to:

- being able to build rapport;
- disclosure of evidence in a neutral tone of voice;
- disclosure of evidence only after having ruled out possible alternatives.

These findings fed the idea that an effective interviewing model would rely on the following principles:

1. Make use of internal pressure,
2. Try to minimize eventual reluctance to provide an account,
3. Rule out alternatives,
4. Challenge the account.

Make use of internal pressure. The underlying assumption of this first principle of GIS is: *Raising internal pressure is more effective compared to external pressure.*

We consider external pressure to be everything that might be used to force the suspect to talk (or 'preferably' to confess). This might be a coercive or even a very coercive technique, varying from bouncing with a fist on the table to waterboarding. But it might also be subtle, psychological techniques like appearing to be best friends with the suspect. In contrast, internal pressure is the tension aroused in the mind of the suspect by the perceived incriminating power of the pieces of evidence to hand (Van Amelsvoort, Rispens, & Grolman, 2012).

In the GIS-model, these pieces of evidence are called tactical clues. A tactical clue is defined as: a piece of information with a source that might link the suspect to the case⁵. As such, the total 'sum' of internal pressure is the result of the amount of available clues and the 'weight' each of these clues has (or a combination of these clues have) in the eyes of the suspect. Take the example of a suspect once confronted with the fact his DNA was found around the neck of the strangled victim. In the perspective of an interviewer this finding generally seems to be a strong tactical clue with a strong source (the forensic institute). But contrary to what the interviewers expected, this tactical clue did not seem to raise much internal pressure for this suspect. It then appeared the man was not familiar with the concept of DNA. The interviewers failed in their attempt to explain this to the suspect. Only after his lawyer had succeeded in explaining this to his client, the suspect felt the internal pressure.

⁵ We use the concept of tactical clues instead of pieces of evidence due to the Dutch inquisitorial criminal justice system: whether or not this information is (finally) perceived to be evidence is decided in court.

The concept of internal pressure is in line with the idea that perceived evidence is an important factor for guilty suspects to confess. Vrij (2010) provides an overview of this idea, first stressed by Gudjonsson, in Gudjonsson and Bownes (1992) and Gudjonsson and Petursson (1991). In Dutch training situations, the concept of internal pressure is also used to make officers understand that external pressure may not only raise ethical debate, but that current research more and more shows that an information-gathering approach in combination with a humanitarian interviewing style may be more fruitful in finding the truth (e.g. Bull, 2014; Holmberg & Christianson, 2002; Williamson, 2006). In a laboratory study Horgan, Russano, Meissner, and Evans (2012) found the use of internal pressure (here more broadly operationalized as perception of proof and feeling of guilt) raised the amount of true confessions and lowered the amount of false confessions compared to external pressure (being a combination of maximizing interviewer pressure and minimizing the consequences of confessing).

Minimize eventual reluctance to provide an account in accordance with the tactical clues.

The first assumption underlying this principle is: *communication aspects should not stand in the way to provide an account*. It is acknowledged that building rapport is an essential condition for successful interviewing (see e.g. Gudjonsson, 2003; Shepherd & Griffiths, 2013; St-Yves, 2006; Vanderhallen & Vervaeke, 2014; Walsh & Bull, 2012). Vice versa problems in the communication can distract from the content of the interview and should therefore be eliminated as much as possible.

The second assumption underlying the second principle of the GIS-model is: *it might be easier for a suspect to start talking about 'innocent' items instead of talking about self-incriminating items*. So starting with an easy item might minimize eventual reluctance to provide an account. To achieve this, an interviewer should, during his or her preparation of the interview, first collect all possible tactical clues. Secondly (s)he should rank them. Clues that appear to be 'easy' for the suspect to confirm, should be ranked first. The same does count for tactical clues that are judged to be possibly anticipated by the suspect (Granhag, Strömwall, Willén, & Hartwig, 2013). Heavy and/or more surprising clues should only be discussed with the suspect later on in the interview. It is, for example, easier for a suspect to confirm that (s)he is indeed the owner of the car the Government Transport Agency states he/she is, than admitting (s)he is the owner of the illegal gun the victim was shot dead with.

We assume the average suspect might think it is odd to deny (s)he is the owner of a certain car when it is his (or her) wish to appear honest to the police. When, later on, he or she is confronted with the gun found in his/her car, the suspect is faced with a new decision: "I've been talking thus far, what impression do I make if I start lying or denying now, or remain silent?"

This raises the following question: *is it more difficult to stop halfway, once having started to talk (about self-incriminating topics)?* This is, as far as we know, not scientifically tested yet in an investigative interviewing setting. But it seems to be in line with some theories derived from social psychology, like Festinger's cognitive dissonance reduction theory (e.g. in Gleitman, 1991): the idea that people have an inner drive to hold attitudes and beliefs in harmony in order to preserve cognitive consistency. As such, we do assume the suspect also has, at least to a certain extent, a wish to appear 'consistent' during an interview.

There is some anecdotal support from interviewers who have noticed this phenomenon to happen during interviews. We also have examples of audio-visually recorded interviews with suspects openly doubting whether or not they will start to remain silent after a challenge. Some of them finally conclude it is better to continue answering because that will make them appear more credible towards the court.

An evidence-based side advantage of ranking tactical clues in an easy-to-heavy order is that this is often a non-chronological order. Since many fabricated alibi stories seem to be built up in a chronological order, addressing the topics non-chronologically might impose some extra cognitive load to the suspect. This is described as being a useful approach to lie detection (Vrij, Mann, Fisher, Leal, Milne, & Bull, 2008). In terms of the GIS-model: the easy-to-heavy order will gradually increase the internal pressure.

Ruling out alternatives. The assumption underlying this principle is: *when alternative explanations are ruled out, the tactical clue is more valuable*. When for example a car with a specific licence plate number is seen at the crime scene, the value of this tactical clue is upgraded when the suspect admits that he is not only the registered owner, but also the only user for the last months. When confronted with such an ‘upgraded’ tactical clue it will presumably create more internal pressure, because of the lack of plausible escapes.

The suspect in the example we started this article with, made it very clear in the beginning of his interview that he was the only user of his car. This was crucial information: he was suspected of killing the new friend of his ex-lover and an eye-witness had seen how the gunman stepped into a sports car very similar to that of the suspect. CCTV furthermore showed the car of the man was heading towards the town the killing took place, just shortly before the crime. Building up evidence can be perceived as trying to establish as much as possible connections between a person, an object, a time and a place. In this example the police had a link between object, time and place: the car being seen at and around the crime scene. By linking himself, and no one else, to the object the suspect linked himself to time and place as well, without this being discussed yet in the interview. On the other hand, suppose the suspect had claimed other people would regularly drive in his car. This would have opened a new line of investigation (towards these people), with the interviewer being able to withhold the information about the car being seen at and around the crime scene.

Hence, possible alternatives can be tested by asking prepared questions, which can be put into an interview table. The aim of these questions is to test alternative explanations in advance (Van der Sleen, 2009), e.g. could someone else have been driving the car that day and thus be the gunman? When these alternatives are falsified this results in a new tactical clue that can be used later on in the interview: you told us earlier you are the one and only driver of your car. When verifying information is found for these alternative explanations, the interviewer really knows the value of his or her tactical clue and can decide to challenge the suspect with it, to do some more investigation first or even to pause or stop the interview; eventually the suspect might even be ruled out as the potential perpetrator. Since false confessions play a part in about one out of five miscarriages of justice (Costanzo & Leo, 2007), the way GIS ‘forces’ the interviewer to be aware of different scenarios might be a significant advantage of the model.

Challenge the account (when necessary). The first assumption underlying the fourth principle of the GIS-model is: *an interview will be most effective only when the suspected is confronted with the tactical clues at the right time and in the right way*. The right time is: (i) when the clues are sufficiently encircled (other possibilities are ruled out; as discussed earlier), and; (ii) only when there is a mismatch between the available clues and the given answers. When, while asking these questions, the suspect provides an account that matches with the clues, there’s no need to confront him/her with them. When there appears to be a mismatch the suspect should be challenged with the clues in order to provide him/her a chance to explain this apparent mismatch.

The challenge has to be neutral, specific and complete (Van Amelsvoort, Rispen, & Grolman, 2012). Neutral reflects the tone of voice and the expressed words. Specific and complete are contrary to vague and incomplete. The importance of being neutral is, both from an ethical perspective and a what is effective-perspective, underlined in many publications (see e.g. Bull, 2014).

The need for a challenge to be specific and complete follows from a second assumption to the fourth principle, based upon the earlier cited cognitive consistency theory: *people will correct more easily a small lie compared to correcting a big lie*. The idea is also that vague challenging can result in counter-questions and those might serve the interviewee to gain some time to think about an escape. Internal pressure is thus lowered.

Contrary to this assumption Granhag, Strömwall, Willén, and Hartwig (2013) have found evidence building up challenges from vague and incomplete to specific and complete serves lie detection as it magnifies the differences between liars and truth tellers. A vague hint often is enough for truth tellers to spontaneously tell more in order to show their innocence. Liars are more inclined to ask counter-questions in response to a vague challenge; like the 'Says who?'-counter-question: liars often want more information to incorporate this information in a plausible excuse (Granhag, personal communication, December, 8, 2010).

Because of this opposing finding it is this part of the GIS-model that seriously needs testing. Where models like the Strategic Use of Evidence (SUE, see Granhag & Hartwig, 2008) and Tactical Use of Evidence (TUE, see Dando & Bull, 2014) are aiming at amplifying the lies liars tell to the interviewer (Bull, 2014), the purpose of the GIS is to not make the liar lie, but to give him or her the opportunity to stop telling lies and shift towards telling the truth.

The drip feeding-manner of challenging within the GIS also is a result of this purpose. Studies comparing the drip feeding-manner of challenging versus late challenging show some mixed results. Evidence for drip feeding the pieces of evidence is found by Dando and Bull (2011) and Lingwood and Bull (2013). On the other hand, Granhag (personal communication, December, 8, 2010) warns for learning effects within the suspect. Drip feeding might uncover the interviewer's tactics too soon. And indeed, although Lingwood and Bull (2013) found an effect for drip feeding, Granhag's SUE-approach (that is: late challenging) showed in their study a greater effect. Granhag himself has found this effect as well (Granhag & Hartwig, 2008). Lingwood and Bull (2013) do propose the amount of pieces of evidence might be an intermediate factor. In their study they made use of two pieces. They suppose the drip feeding-effect may be more powerful with more pieces available.

Final remarks

Although the principles and underlying assumptions concerning the GIS-model have face validity, are mostly derived from general communication theories, and do often match with findings within the information-gathering paradigm, they themselves aren't empirically tested yet. It also raises questions like how GIS relates to other investigative interview strategies within the information-gathering paradigm. Which works best in what situation? And: can strategies be combined to deliberately change tactics within the interview? Here lies a future challenge.

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