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Voices from the Front Line: Police Officers' Perceptions of Real-World Interviewing with Vulnerable Witnesses

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Abstract

The current study investigated the experiences of nine UK police officers who specialise in the interviewing of vulnerable witnesses. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with each of the officers, the interviews were then analysed using an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach, hence the relatively low sample size. Three key themes were identified. These themes were; *pressures on interviewers* including cognitive load, the culture within the police service and stress; the *lack of development of interviewing skills* including few opportunities for continuing professional development and feedback; and *witness considerations* including rapport building and interviewing facilities. Participants were acutely aware of the importance of Achieving Best Evidence (ABE) guidelines (Home Office, 2011). However, compliance in the real-world was perceived to be difficult and barriers to conducting high-quality interviews were identified.

Keywords: *Vulnerable witnesses; interviewers' perspectives; field study; Achieving Best Evidence.*

Introduction

Witness testimony is a fundamental aspect of the criminal justice system, whether the witness is a victim of crime or an observer of events (Hope, 2013). Evidence provided by a witness plays an essential role in forensic investigations and the delivery of justice (Association of Chief Police Officers [ACPO], 2013; Hope, 2010). Eliciting reliable information from witnesses during interviews is, therefore, a critical factor in investigations. However, those with vulnerabilities, which may be due to their age, learning difficulties or mental state, may be placed at a disadvantage during an interview (Bull, 2010). They may find it harder to cope with the interview requirements and to provide relevant detailed information (Gudjonsson, 2010). Children have described feelings of anxiety, and even terror, at the prospect of being interviewed about their

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experiences (Back, Gustafsson, Larsson, & Bertero, 2011). Additionally, vulnerable witnesses may be more susceptible to providing ambiguous or unreliable information if they have poor communication or social skills (Powell, 2002). It is vital therefore that interviews with vulnerable witnesses are conducted appropriately (Back et al., 2011; Lamb & Garretson, 2003).

To assist witnesses and the provision of justice, psychologists have examined the optimum conditions that help witnesses provide reliable testimony (Fisher, Geiselman & Amador, 1989; Geiselman, Fisher, MacKinnon & Holland, 1985; Lamb, Orbach, Hershkowitz, Esplin, & Horowitz, 2007; La Rooy & Dando, 2010; Myklebust & Alison, 2000; Oxburgh, Myklebust, & Grant, 2010). Working closely with practitioners, psychologists have informed policy and procedures to improve witness interviewing (Oxburgh & Dando, 2011) paying considerable attention to obtaining reliable and detailed accounts (Milne & Bull, 2005). This collaboration has resulted in the provision of guidance for best practice in the UK when interviewing vulnerable witnesses and has allowed recorded interviews to be presented as evidence-in-chief at court hearings (Bull, 2010). These best practice recommendations for UK police officers are contained in the 'Achieving Best Evidence in Criminal Proceedings' guidelines (Ministry of Justice [MoJ], 2011). This documentation (from this point referred to as 'ABE guidance') provides information for interviewers to help them understand how they can better manage the complexities of interviewing vulnerable people.

ABE guidance recommends that interviews should comprise four stages; rapport building, elicitation of a free narrative account, questioning and closure of the interview. Police officers in the UK undergo compulsory training, based on ABE guidance, before commencement of any interview with vulnerable witnesses (MoJ, 2011). Advice is also provided through national police forums, which have highlighted problematic aspects of real-world interviewing. For example, the importance of planning and preparation for the interview with vulnerable witnesses is stressed (ACPO, 2013).

Although there is international consensus regarding best practice interviewing techniques, these are not always replicated in practice (Lamb, Sternberg, Orbach, Esplin, & Mitchell, 2002; Powell, 2008; Powell & Barnett, 2015). Despite their training, interviewers deviate from the ABE guidance in terms of method and process (Criminal Justice Joint Inspectorate [CJJI], 2014; National Police Chiefs' Council [NPCC], 2015; Powell & Barnett, 2015). A review of investigative interviews with vulnerable witnesses found that few interviews complied with recommended guidance (Powell, 2008) and interviewers used sub-optimal questions, for example, long, complicated or leading questions, which research has shown may result in inaccurate information being elicited (Milne & Bull, 2005). Additionally, in cases where witnesses did not disclose after the initial prompt, or if details of the particular offence were not provided, interviewers deviated from interview guidance (Hughes-Scholes & Powell, 2013). This non-compliance can negatively impact on the perceived credibility of witnesses (Hill & Davies, 2012) and could, therefore, have an impact for the criminal justice process. Characteristics of the ABE interview may contribute to difficulties experienced by the interviewer, including the requirement to obtain explicit details from the witness, the unfamiliar nature of the open-ended questioning style, and problems with the limitations of memory (Wright & Powell, 2007).

Fisher, Compo, Rivard, and Hirn (2014) suggested that the interview is a social interaction where interviewers show witnesses that they are sincerely interested in their welfare. That is, interviewers are required to take into account child sensitivity issues, such as suggestibility (Fisher et al., 2014). In addition to the social exchanges, ABE interviewing is also a cognitively demanding task. Interviewing is recognised as being a highly complex process involving a broad range of competencies and skills (Powell, 2002). Interviewers are required to listen actively, notate responses, and formulate hypotheses to account for the events described (Fisher et al., 2014).

Previous studies have explored interviewers' performance within the ABE interview setting (Cederborg, Alm, da Silva Nises, & Lamb, 2013; Fisher et al., 2014), and a couple have investigated police officers' concerns in terms of their knowledge and training (Aarons, Powell, & Browne, 2004; Wright & Powell, 2006) and what they consider to be the most important aspects of interviewing (Cherryman & Bull, 2001), but no previous research has sought the interviewers' perspective regarding factors that enhance and impede their interview performance.

It has long been accepted that policing is a stressful occupation (Hickman, Fricas, Strom, & Pope, 2011). The challenges of police work are sources of stress through organisational pressures, operational stressors, public expectations and personal stressors (Andersen, Papazoglou, Nyman, Koskelainen, & Gustafsberg, 2015). These stressors can vary in terms of frequency and intensity dependent on the type of events police officers are dealing with (Brown, Fielding, & Grover, 1999). However, police occupational stress can impact on officers' performance and the quality of service provided to the public (Hickman et al., 2011). It is of vital importance, therefore, to ensure that officers can manage the stressful work they carry out.

The nature of interviewing vulnerable witnesses means that officers are in a position of considerable responsibility. They are accountable for criminal investigations and are often required to obtain evidence concerning child abuse investigations (Davies & Westcott, 1999). Staff working within these intensive client-focused roles can experience problems with witnesses feeling anger, embarrassment, fear and/or despair. Dealing with these troubles can be frustrating or testing (Maslach, Jackson, & Leiter, 1997). The subject matter and details presented during interviews with vulnerable witnesses can, therefore, be challenging and upsetting.

When police officers are involved in demanding situations, avoidant coping styles and social stressors can play a significant role in their health (Menard & Arter, 2013). Along with workplace stressors, being exposed to the additional unpleasant aspects of human life can contribute to burnout (Martinussen, Richardsen, & Burke, 2007). However, the negative effects of burnout can be mediated with individual resources, in terms of personality traits and coping mechanisms (Martinussen et al., 2007). Anderson (2000) examined coping styles in child protection workers dealing with child sexual abuse. The use of active coping styles varied according to the level of burnout but the majority of the participants in the study were emotionally exhausted (Anderson, 2000). The health and welfare of officers is not only linked to the type of work they are involved with and individual coping styles but also the social support available to them when dealing with stressful situations (Menard & Arter, 2013). These aspects may be relevant for interviewers of vulnerable witnesses but, to date, there has been no research examining the consequences for the interviewer.

Previous research has pinpointed weaknesses in the skills of UK police officers when interviewing vulnerable witnesses (CJJI, 2014; NPPC, 2015; Powell & Barnett, 2015). In different investigations, research has also highlighted the detrimental impact of stress for officers working with vulnerable populations (Davies & Westcott, 1999; Maslach et al., 1997) who deal with extremely challenging cases (e.g. child sexual abuse) (Martinussen et al., 2007). Understanding police officers' experiences of interviewing vulnerable witnesses, and how they cope with the stressors generated during this essential task, is important. Accordingly, the aim of the current study was to explore, directly, UK police officers' experiences of conducting interviews as recommended by the ABE guidance.

Method

Methodological Approach

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) uses an inductive process focusing on the interpretation of meaning (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009) to gain a greater understanding of the nature and quality of specific phenomena (Willig, 2013). The IPA approach helps to understand how participants make sense of their lived experiences (Back et al., 2011; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). IPA was, therefore, appropriate for the current study as the aim was to understand the interviewing of vulnerable witnesses from the interviewers' perspective.

Participants' experiences and their understanding of interviewing was explored through semi-structured interviews. This gave the participants an opportunity to explain their experiences in their terms, rather than using pre-defined categories (Smith et al., 2009). Analyses of participants' observations were carried out, by taking into account how they interpreted their experience of conducting ABE interviews. The principles used for ensuring quality in IPA research are: sensitivity to context, commitment and rigor, transparency and coherence, and impact and importance of the qualitative research (Smith et al, 2009; Yardley, 2000).

Participants

Sampling for IPA is generally based on purposive sampling with a selection process based on the participants' experiences concerning the focus of the research (Back et al., 2011). The participants in the current study were nine serving police officers, from one UK police service. Participants were all trained in the use of ABE guidance for interviewing vulnerable witnesses and regularly interviewed vulnerable witnesses as part of their work roles. The sample comprised eight females and one male. The age of participants ranged from 35 to 52 years ($M = 45$ years, $SD = 6.34$ years). The number of years participants had been trained in ABE interviewing ranged from 1 to 20 years ($M = 10$ years, $SD = 6.84$ years) and the range of length of police service was 8 to 29 years ($M = 17$ years, $SD = 8.22$ years).

Procedure

Support for the research project and permission to approach ABE trained police officers was obtained from the police force's senior officer with responsibility for protecting vulnerable people. Potential participants were identified and their email addresses obtained. The Principal Investigator (PI) contacted possible participants by email and provided them with a Participant Information Sheet. The onus was on potential participants to contact the PI if they were happy to take part in the research.

Arrangements for individual interviews were made with the participants who agreed to take part. One-to-one interviews with these participants were held at pre-arranged convenient locations. The PI conducted all of the interviews. At their interviews, the participants were welcomed, thanked and invited to re-read a copy of the Information Sheet. Anonymity of data, data security, and confidentiality limits were then discussed. An informed consent form was completed by each participant before their interview commenced.

All interviews were recorded using a digital audio Dictaphone. Following completion of each interview, participants were asked if they wished to clarify any points and were given the opportunity to ask questions. At the conclusion, participants were thanked, handed a de-brief

letter with contact details of the research team. The interviews ranged from 20 mins to 33 mins ($M = 26$ mins, $SD = 3.22$ mins).

Interviews

A semi-structured interview protocol was prepared for this study (see Appendix). This interview structure was chosen as it allowed for a dialogue between the PI and participants. The discussion enabled rich, full accounts of the participants' experiences of ABE interviewing to be elicited (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014) in a flexible way (Bryman, 2008). The interview protocol was followed for each of the nine participants. The PI, an experienced interviewer, engaged with the participants throughout the interview by asking open-ended questions, followed by probing questions and prompts.

Data Analysis

The PI transcribed the digitally recorded interviews verbatim and included utterances from both herself and the participants. During transcription, the focus of the PI was on the text of the interview (Willig, 2013) and gathering as much information from the interviews as possible (Smith et al., 2009).

The individual transcripts were then analyzed according to IPA principles. The nine transcripts, taken one at a time, were read and re-read and content relevant to the aims of the study was sought. Initial notes and exploratory comments were made regarding conceptual and descriptive features of the transcript wording (Smith, et al., 2009). Topics were then identified, named and recorded on the individual transcripts. These topics were reflected on and viewed in relation to each other. Themes were identified and structured according to concepts or meaning. These were summarized and quotations that illustrated each theme were highlighted. This process was repeated for each transcript before then making cross-case comparisons. Connections and recurrent themes were developed and the meanings of the participants' accounts integrated across the nine transcripts, capturing the participants shared experience of ABE interviewing.

This IPA approach enabled the PI to interpret, through amplification and illumination, the meanings that participants had made of their experiences (Smith et al., 2009). The process allowed descriptions of the identified phenomenon, i.e. ABE interviewing, to be clustered into discrete categories, or themes (Starks & Trinidad, 2007). To create a structure for the analysis, the emergent themes were condensed, charted and fitted together. This grouping formed the super-ordinate and sub-ordinate themes representing the participants' subjective experiences (see Table 1). These were then transformed into a narrative account, with examples and verbatim extracts from the participants.

Results and Discussion

Three super-ordinate and seven sub-ordinate themes emerged from the data analysis, which participants' perceived and experienced when conducting ABE interviews. These are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1.
Summary of participants referring to identified themes.

	Participants who mentioned a theme									
	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8	P9	Total
1 Pressures on ABE interviewers										
1A Cognitive load	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	9
1B Culture within the police	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	9
1C Stress	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	9
2 Developing ABE interviewing skills										
2A ABE training	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	9
2B Feedback	✓		✓	✓	✓		✓		✓	6
3 Witness considerations										
3A Rapport building	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	9
3B Interviewing facilities	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓		7

Super-ordinate theme 1: Pressures on ABE Interviewers

A major theme was the perceived pressure that interviewers face when conducting ABE interviews. This pressure was perceived to be as a result of (i) cognitive load during interviews (ii) the organisational culture within the police service, and (iii) external stressors for the interviewer.

Sub-ordinate theme 1A: Cognitive load.

All nine participants reported that aspects of cognitive functioning, decision making or information processing impacted negatively upon their ABE interviews. They referred to feeling under pressure when thinking about the correct interview questions required to comply with ABE guidelines. Some also communicated that processing the information provided by the witness and deciding whether, or not, to break into the witnesses' description of events were difficult during the interview.

“you are very conscious about your style of questioning and (...)”¹ you’ve not got to ask leading questions, so where you would have a normal conversation with an adult and not worry about asking the wrong question, you’ve got to be very conscious you’re almost

¹ (...) depicts words omitted from the original interview transcript.
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playing the question in your head before you say it, to make sure you're not leading the child" (participant 7)

"you're very aware of not interrupting but trying to find the right time to stop (...) you think this isn't relevant but if I'm going to interrupt am I going to put them off (...) what they're trying to say" (participant 1)

Several participants highlighted that remembering information was difficult during ABE interviews, explaining that note taking was problematic and distracting for witnesses. Therefore, participants reported trying to retain information, and process it, whilst trying to ask appropriate questions.

"you might get somebody who has been great and will talk to you but you're thinking, hang on a minute, slow down, I've got to remember all this" (participant 3)

"you're not writing anything down (...) you're thinking did he tell me this or did she tell me that or is it something another person [said] and you have to ask them again" (participant 8)

Notwithstanding these concerns participants recognized the requirement to concentrate throughout the interviews. However, this and the importance of the interviews led to participants experiencing perceived pressure and fatigue.

"you've got a real person in front of you disclosing things to you that they may never have told anybody else before (...) really private personal things about abuse (...) you have to concentrate on what they're saying" (participant 2)

"It can be quite draining" (participant 6)

"Sometimes you feel really drained" (participant 8)

"It's frustrating" and "it's draining" (participant 5)

"Afterwards it makes you feel exhausted" (participant 1)

"It was so frustrating, I felt I'd let her down" (participant 4)

The experiences described by participants, quoted above, confirmed previous research which found that the task of conducting witness interviews is cognitively demanding (Fisher et al., 2014). Few researchers, to date, have focused on the cognitive processing of information by interviewers during witness interviews (Vrij, Hope, & Fisher, 2014), although it is likely that interviewers have a limited capacity to process information (Kleider-Offutt, Clevinger, & Bond, 2016). Cognitive load can also impact on interviewers' decision-making and the interpretation of non-verbal cues and emotions (Kleider-Offutt et al., 2016).

Sub-ordinate theme 1B: Culture within the police.

The occupational culture of an organization provides the rules which govern the behaviour of staff and the structure of the organization (Chan, 1996). The culture is the ideas, symbols, values and beliefs that the members of the organization have in common (Bar-On, Brown, Kirkcaldy, & Thome, 2000). Nine of the participants described a culture where they were expected to fulfill their role with strength and resilience, and without question.

"I think you are police and you get used to having to deal with all sorts of situations and you just get on with it" (participant 7)

"it's like go and interview that person and get on with it" (participant 2)

Participants also described suppressing emotions and a lack of support from managers.

"I think that because of the attitude (...) 'you're police get on with it' (...) [and] unfortunately with the pressures of work (...) [and] there's another ABE to do (...)

[managers] can't afford for you to say I'm not doing that one (...) cause I'm stressed"
(participant 7)

However, they also discussed support from their peers. The type of work police officers are involved with may be emotionally challenging (Tuckey, Winwood, & Dollard, 2012) but camaraderie and social support are part of policing culture (Biggs, Brough, & Barbour, 2014) and can be a buffer for organizational stress (Brough & Frame, 2004). So, despite the stressors of ABE interviewing, policing culture and good social support may mitigate the effects (Menard & Arter, 2013). Participants made the following observations.

"you're never doing it on your own, there's always someone to talk to from a support point of view (...) and of course police humor comes into it (...) you have to laugh through a few dark times (...) you just have to get on with it" (participant 4)

Police organizational culture has a substantial impact on officers' everyday behaviours, including how they interact with the public (Brough, Chataway, & Biggs, 2016). Participants in the current study felt they had an important purpose, supporting the cultural view of policing as being more than just a job (Brough et al., 2016). However, the participants also identified that suppressing emotions was a source of pressure, they had to *"be professional"* (participants 1, 3, 4, 5, 7, 8, & 9) when conducting ABE interviews. This confirmed previous findings of an expectation for officers to show emotional control (Bar-On et al., 2000), courage and toughness (Tuckey et al., 2012).

Occupational culture includes an element of 'on the job learning' and passing knowledge on through the experience of others (Chan, 1996). Participants in the current study described learning from more experienced colleagues.

"I was with a very experienced detective and had seen him conduct numerous different interviews (...) it does give you some (...) on the job experience as opposed to classroom training" (participant 2)

"I've watched a more experienced officer doing this and I thought that's a really good way of doing that" (participant 7)

Participants perceived this element of police culture as a benefit when conducting ABE interviews. However, it may offer an explanation for their lack of compliance with training and good practice. ABE interviewers may wrongly perceive that other more experienced interviewers are, by default, good interviewers (Goodman & Melinder, 2007). Less experienced interviewers may, therefore, resort to what they perceive to be the most appropriate method of interviewing, as modelled by experienced officers, rather than following the ABE guidance.

Sub-ordinate theme 1C: External stressors.

Policing is recognised as a stressful occupation. Distinct sources of stress for police officers are heavy caseloads, time pressures and collaboration with other professionals, including supervisors and prosecutors (Wright & Powell, 2006). Nine participants reported these as sources of stress.

"a lot of the time (...) you felt you weren't always prepared enough, or you didn't have enough time to prepare, it was a bit (...) get a room, (...) go in, and your boss is 'what's the result' (...) instead of being able to go in all calm, fully prepared (...) because of all your other workload (...) and you've got one chance with the child (...) [managers] just don't realize, if they're not ABE trained, how important it is to get it right first time" (participant 5)

"we had a job and I don't know whether it is naivety of my supervision because they probably didn't know what ABE interviewing is, but I was expected to do nine interviews in

one day (...) I ended up doing four but they were rushed ones (...) I felt really stressed and drained that day because it was awful, and I just thought oh my God this is really bad why am I being made to do this" (participant 8)

"one of the bosses decided that I had to interview this (...) 3 or 4-year-old little girl, never done children before, I haven't been (...) trained [to interview] young children and he said 'oh basically just need it doing' and I said well I'll have a go" (participant 9)

"it doesn't matter if you've got somebody in custody and you're being told you've got to go and do this interview, to me the interview is the interview (...) you can't rush it (...) I try not to let anything else affect that interview because (...) [it's the] one occasion where this person gets to speak out about what's happened to them" (participant 2)

In line with previous research, participants in the current study described various stressors and emotions they experienced during interviews (Tuckey et al., 2012). The duty to carry out the interview correctly, a feeling of responsibility for the investigation, and workload strain (Davies & Westcott, 1999) were recognized as stressors. These pressures were compounded by other factors, notably the stress triggered by managers (Brown et al., 1999). Several participants expressed concern that managers requested interviews be conducted without allowing for the appropriate planning and preparation. Planning and preparation has been identified as a vital component for specialist interviews (Cherryman & Bull, 2001). Notwithstanding these difficulties participants recognised the importance of the interview by showing responsibility and accountability.

ABE interviews are conducted with witnesses who are vulnerable, and the content can be sensitive, often involving sexual or violent offences. Significantly, the interview can also have emotional connections for the interviewer.

"there will be the odd case that does impact on you for whatever reason, and it might well be that there is an emotional connection around that specific case (...) one of my colleagues (...) it was a post mortem but we did an ABE with family members [he] had a child the same age as the baby that had died and that for him was quite an emotional case" (participant 7).

"for some reason that kid, I don't know if it's cause she has the same name as my daughter, or the same kind of age, I couldn't shake that, why that poor girl sort of thing" (participant 2)

This is an important finding as a recent study showed that feigning expressions of positive emotions and suppression of negative emotions allowed officers to achieve their objectives in specific situations (Schaible & Six, 2016). For example, obtaining important evidence in an investigative interview. It is important to develop effective coping mechanisms, which can deflect the influence of stressful situations (Waters & Ussery, 2007) and mitigate the problems of occupational stress (Menard & Arter, 2013). Participants in the current study focused on the importance of the investigation, which can be an effective coping mechanism (Powell, Cassematis, Benson, Smallbone, & Wortley, 2014).

"I suppose there has been such a mixture [of cases] (...) I suppose enjoyable isn't the right word but I (...) have (...) enjoyed that experience of (...) [going] through [them] (...) it was an investment towards (...) a conviction, then it made me feel good (...) I could assist (...) to get the offender to court (...) I felt that was the one thing that I really liked, to be able to see the thing right the way through to court" (participant 9)

Emotionally challenging operational experiences may, however, lead to a gradual progression of psychological injury (Tuckey et al., 2012) and if not managed appropriately burnout or emotional exhaustion may result (Schaible & Six, 2016). While officers may be at risk of

compassion fatigue (i.e. the trauma suffered by helping professionals) and burnout, this may be relieved by compassion satisfaction (i.e. the fulfilment from helping others) (Conrad & Kellar-Guenther, 2006). Therefore, the level of emotional connection may help to understand the handling of experienced stress (Schaible & Six, 2016) for ABE interviewers.

Super-ordinate theme 2: Applying and Developing ABE Interviewing Skills

The second super-ordinate theme identified in the current study was categorized as the methods used by participants to apply and develop their ABE interviewing skills. Sub-themes related to (i) difficulties applying training in the real-world and (ii) the development of skills through feedback.

Sub-ordinate theme 2A: Applying ABE raining.

Training programmes for ABE interviewing are provided to all interviewers but the research-based and expert-endorsed recommendations are seldom followed (Lamb, Hershkowitz, & Orbach, 2008). All nine participants in the current study revealed difficulties they had faced in the real-world, which they felt were at odds with the training environment. For example, the quotes below illustrate that participants knew that, in theory, they should ask open questions but that this was not easy with vulnerable witnesses.

"I felt that although the training was good in theory, doing it in practice because you have to adapt so much to different people, I found it quite difficult" (participant 4)

"in the training scenario, you're taught how the victim should answer you, but they don't answer like that so then it's hard (...) I had one girl and I said right tell me everything and she sat there and she was so quiet (...) I had to break it up (...) piecemeal, and that goes against everything, but that was the only way she could do the interview" (participant 9).

"so in training (...) they talk about open questions (...) but often you ask that kind of question and the person sits there and is like 'what are you talking about?' They need a little more guidance than this massively open question (...) you are trying your best to think what your question needs to be, think about how you need to word the question to the person and then listen to what they're already saying to you, so it's quite a complicated procedure" (participant 2)

These quotes highlighted that some vulnerable witnesses find it very challenging to answer open questions, which may be due to the sensitive or emotional nature of the information they are discussing (Goodman & Melinder, 2007). Participants also voiced their experiences with regard to how, in the real world, open questions can actually lead to difficulties.

"it becomes (...) difficult (...) getting the evidence that you need, you have to try and stop that person (...) telling you loads of (...) information which isn't relevant but it is very hard to do that when someone wants to talk to you" (participant 8)

"it was a difficult interview because they rambled and (...) went on and on and trying to get them back on track to what we were talking about and then they kept going on about other things" (participant 1)

ABE interview training endorses open-ended questions, which are the most appropriate for eliciting accurate information and the fullest accounts from witnesses (Powell, Hughes-Scholes, Smith, & Sharman, 2014). However, interviewers often divert from training practices (CJJI, 2014; Powell, Wright, & Clark, 2010) particularly concerning open-questioning (Powell, et al., 2014). Participants in the present study recognized the importance of asking appropriate questions.

However, they also described various difficult real-world interviewing experiences and identified that asking open questions allowed the witnesses a freedom to talk. This often made it difficult to interrupt the witness and re-focus them in order to obtain evidence rather than superfluous information. The participants described resorting to asking more specific questioning (Lamb et al., 2002) to regain control of interviews.

Sub-ordinate theme 2B: Feedback.

The complex skills required for ABE interviewing cannot be learned through instruction alone (Yii, Powell, & Guadagno, 2014). On-going training, using practical activities with prompt and specific expert feedback, is required for developing and maintaining officers' skills (Lamb et al., 2002). Feedback was identified by six participants in the current study as an important aspect of their on-going training. However, concerns were raised by these participants that they did not receive structured feedback regarding their performance.

"they give you a course and I don't think there's any validation then of whether you're capable of doing that training (...) there isn't any testing or validation of how good you are at doing [ABE interviews] or (...) any feedback in relation to that either (...) there's no real quality assurance of if you're getting it right" (participant 7)

"[I] don't really ever feel like we ever got any input or guidance or reviewed by any (...) training people" (participant 4)

"no one has ever given me feedback, never in the entire time I've done an ABE, I've never had any feedback off a supervisor, CPS, lawyer, anything, it's very rare" (participant 7)

It was also highlighted that participants relied on colleagues to provide some feedback and they were required to attend refresher training courses.

"when I first started (...) you'd get some feedback if someone was friendly enough to be able to give you feedback but you weren't really monitored" and "you don't know if you are doing them right or wrong basically" (participant 9)

"it's relying on your colleague, you talk about it with your colleague (...) and they (...) say (...) you did really well and you covered it on that or you did this" (participant 5)

"my refresher, which was a few years back (...) [we] had an input in how [CPS] would like things to be done" (participant 9)

Participants in the current study reported problems in appreciating the standard of their performance. They were generally not informed of any errors they may have made in their questioning style, and revealed rarely receiving advice or training from supervisors or trainers regarding their ABE interviews. This confirms previous research findings that interviewers currently receive little regular structured feedback on their performance (Powell et al., 2010). Without feedback the interviewer has little idea about their performance (Powell & Barnett, 2015) and in the absence of on-going feedback officers may lapse into using less effective interview techniques (Lamb et al., 2002). A lack of feedback can, therefore, lead to mistakes in recognising the question types being used, which has been identified as a source of error for trainee interviewers (Powell, Benson, Sharman, Guadagno, & Steinberg, 2013). Participants in the current study referred to receiving feedback from colleagues and viewed gaining experience from other interviewers as beneficial to their interviewing skills. The lack of structured feedback, coupled with interviewers learning from and receiving feedback from peers, may contribute to the difficulties with ABE compliance. Improvements in these areas can be achieved through supervision, feedback, and training (Powell, 2008), which have been recommended (CJJI, 2014).

Super-ordinate theme 3: Considering the Witness

The third super-ordinate theme encompassed considerations relating specifically to the witness and was notable for all participants in the current study. Participants focused on (i) the importance of rapport building, and (ii) the interview room facilities.

Sub-ordinate theme 3A: Rapport building.

Rapport building is an important aspect of interviewing vulnerable witnesses and is frequently reviewed in research literature and within legal contexts (Abbe & Brandon, 2014; ACPO, 2013; CJI, 2014; Hershkowitz, 2011). All participants in the current study reported their experiences of building rapport with witnesses and indicated an awareness of the importance of continuing rapport throughout the interview.

“you have to sort of be like personable with the person and you can't be pan-faced (...) you have to try and make them feel at ease and you have to try and [let them] feel like they can tell you anything, keep them feeling encouraged” (participant 8)

The demographics of the interviewee were seen as influential for rapport building. Some participants recognized their personal circumstances and reflected on how they were able to build rapport more naturally with certain witnesses. In addition, how participants viewed the dynamic relationship between themselves and their interviewees was also acknowledged.

“I'm really good with teenagers, and scared of kids (...) they'll say it's a difficult one, she's failing to engage and I think, I'll get through to her (...) through rapport” (participant 4)

“you are conscious that you are using terminology that the child understands (...) for me personally, not having kids it is quite unusual to interact with children” (participant 7)

Participants mentioned that to help rapport building with a child, it was important to give the witness a say in the proceedings. Building trust was also seen as important to encourage disclosure of information.

“I decided in the end, well I spoke to the girl, and she said she wanted her mum there, but she didn't want her in the room with her, so it was just me and her, which set things at ease a bit more.” (participant 3).

“you have to be sensitive to where they wanna go (...) just watching them picking up on how comfortable they are [and] when you can see they relax (...) you do see trust, I don't care what anybody says you do see trust” (participant 4)

Children have described experiencing positive aspects of being interviewed but also confusion and discomfort about the process (Mudaly & Goddard, 2006). Similarly, participants in the current study reported that following the ABE guidance to the letter can be problematic.

“when I was speaking to her I just wanted her to tell me, she was quite clearly struggling to speak, and I was just trying to put her at ease” (participant 2)

“...the whole truth and lies (...) again when you're in training you get taught this one specific little tale you know and it did seem quite patronizing, I felt like I was patronizing her.” (participant 3).

ABE guidance recommends that rapport building, other than pleasantries, should be conducted outside the interview and ideally not form part of the interview itself (ACPO, 2013). It is also advised that where vulnerable witnesses require additional support, such as if they find the situation difficult or embarrassing, then the interviewer should provide additional assistance through rapport (ACPO, 2013). For participants in the current study rapport was not seen simply

as the first stage of the interview process, never to be returned to, but instead that it should be reinforced throughout the interview.

It was encouraging to see rapport building as a recurring theme in the current study because, in previous research with child abuse victims, children reported feeling they were not listened to and their voices not heard during police interviews (Mudaly & Goddard, 2006). In order of importance for the interview process, out of seven identified interview skills, rapport building has been ranked fifth for child protection officers, and seventh for all officers (Cherryman & Bull, 2001). That is, in previous research, rapport building has not been rated very highly by officers whereas the current study suggests participants clearly understood that this feature of ABE interviewing is paramount. Personal attributes of the child and building rapport to establish a relationship with the witness were important elements for the officers to enable effective communication and elicit disclosures.

Sub-ordinate theme 3B: Interviewing facilities.

The facilities and recording equipment should be of a quality to ensure that presentation of the evidence, both visual and audio, is clear and reliable (CJJI, 2014). Additionally, children have suggested that the room in which the interview takes place needs to be a 'happy room' (Mudaly & Goddard, 2006). Therefore, interview rooms should be made as child-friendly as possible (CJJI, 2014).

Seven participants in the current study made reference to the condition of the interview suites and the impact this has on witnesses. The availability of facilities was also highlighted as having an effect on the conduct of ABE interviews.

"I look at (...) [the] environment and equipment (...) we say it's like a living room, but my living room doesn't look like this, it's sterile (...) I think more of my criticism would be about the practical parts (...) trying to make kids feel comfortable in an environment that is staged" (participant 4)

"the quality of the video interview suites is really poor in general (...) the whole process could be much better if the equipment was better (...) there is this drive to do all these video interviews but without the correct facilities" (participant 2)

Participants described their frustration at a lack of appropriate equipment and facilities, including refreshments. These issues were viewed as stressful and it was perceived that they impacted upon the interviewers and the witnesses.

"it's embarrassing to take people there, who may have come from far (...) had a (...) stressful journey (...) then [they have] got this stressful experience to go through and you can't even say do you want a drink of water cause there's no glass to put it in (...) why is it so difficult to get some tea and coffee for goodness sake (...)" (participant 2)

"it's just the environment we have to take these vulnerable people to (...) some of those suites (...) are not very nice, they are dark and dingy (...) they are very antiquated (...) you have to go to the police station and open up (...) that sort of thing doesn't sit right with me, it should be a nice (...) light airy environment they're going into (...) I feel that would impact on the person because it impacts on me, when I go in and think this poor person coming in to do an interview here, and you have to (...) apologise for the state of the building (...) it's not very good (...) you just have to (...) try and make them feel as happy as you can at the time" (participant 8)

Participants also highlighted that due to changes in legislation for interviewing vulnerable and intimidated witnesses there was a perceived increase in the requirement to conduct ABE

interviews. It was perceived that this has not been matched with an increase in the availability of facilities.

“demand for the suite is another issue (...) there’s that many ABE’s being done now because of legislation change (...) the pressure of actually getting an interview suite booked (...) it’s all stuff you don’t need when you are already dealing with a horrible situation” (participant 7).

This sub-ordinate theme highlighted the difficulties faced by interviewers in the real-world. The interviewing facilities used by the participants were perceived as problematic for them when conducting good ABE interviews. It was particularly important for participants and several introduced this theme, without prompting, when the PI had concluded her questions. Little research has been conducted to look at the impact of interview environment on interviewee productivity. However, participants in the current study clearly viewed the interviewing facilities as an important factor, which is supported by the opinion of vulnerable witnesses themselves (Mudaly & Goddard, 2006). A recent review examining ABE compliance also suggested that the accommodation where children are interviewed needs improvement (CJJI, 2014).

General Discussion

The aim of the present study was to give a unique insight into UK police officers' experiences when conducting interviews with vulnerable witnesses. The IPA approach enabled three themes, perceived by participants, to be identified. These may contribute to interviewers' difficulties complying with best practice guidelines.

First, participants identified their experience of ABE interviewing as a complex social and cognitive process. It is likely that the cognitive demands of interviewing vulnerable witnesses lead to pressure and may introduce interviewer errors and non-compliance with guidance. Aspects of police culture, a lack of understanding from managers, and the stress of conducting interviews that will stand up in court, also added to the pressure participants faced. However, despite ABE interviewing being identified as a stressful process, participants described various approaches to deal with the pressures of the task. Specifically, participants reported high levels of satisfaction when helping witnesses during the ABE interview process.

Second, the opportunity to develop ABE interviewing skills was recognized as being important to participants in the current study. They realized that a mastery of specific elements of the ABE interview protocol could not be achieved during classroom-based courses. These highly complex interviewing skills require structured feedback and ongoing training (Lamb et al., 2000). Participants in the current study expressed concern that this feedback and training were not routinely offered. They also pointed out that, despite their best efforts, problems were experienced when they applied ABE training in the real-world. Additionally, the participants perceived more experienced officers as a source of 'best practice'. This may not be helpful as, in the absence of structured feedback, interviewers may have learnt, and had reinforced, poor techniques from colleagues.

The third emergent theme was witness considerations. Building rapport and the facilities used for interviewing witnesses were highlighted as key aspects inherent in the witness experience. Interview guidelines regarding rapport building should be followed to provide optimum circumstances for witnesses to recall events (Cronch, Viljoen, & Hansen, 2006; Hershkowitz, 2011). However, rapport with the witness is not always fully established (Abbe & Brandon, 2014). Participants in the current study discussed their relationship with witnesses and the requirement for flexibility around rapport building. With practice they felt they developed

their rapport building skills and were more comfortable building rapport when they had more interviewing and life experiences. Participants also felt that interviewing facilities have an impact on witnesses. They highlighted that witnesses need to be comfortable with both the interviewer and their surroundings.

Methodological Limitation

The present study aimed to explore the personal experiences of ABE interviewers. The sampling method recommended for IPA research has resulted in the recruitment of a small sample of the thousands of police officers who are ABE trained throughout the UK. However, their contributions have highlighted some of the difficulties officers face when conducting ABE interviews. The findings presented here summarized a consensus across the small sample but it is appreciated that these findings may not be generalizable to the broader population of ABE trained investigators.

Practical Implications and Future Research

Reducing the cognitive load for interviewers may assist with compliance with best practice. For example, providing specific protocols for difficult or complex cases may be beneficial in this regard, as then interviewers could focus on dealing sensitively with a difficult situation, rather than the interview content and formatting of questions. Previous research has explored the effects of cognitive load on interviewees (Kleider-Offutt et al., 2016; Vrij et al., 2014), although, how it affects interviewers in an applied setting has, to date, been overlooked (Kleider-Offutt et al., 2016).

Additionally, to promote ABE compliance and identify any interviewer weaknesses, interviewers' performance should be reviewed through structured, regular feedback. Interviewing is a highly specialist skill that requires effective supervision and monitoring (Powell, et al, 2010). This might be achieved via regular peer or self-assessment of interview skills (Akehurst, Cherryman, Lawrence & Hayter, 2016).

Conclusion

ABE interviewing is a cognitively, emotionally and socially demanding task that has a considerable impact upon the witness experience, the investigation and the criminal justice process. The participants in the current study revealed the pressures they face when attempting to obtain accurate and reliable testimony from vulnerable interviewees. In sum, participants perceived that cognitive load at interview, expectations and demands from within and outside their police organization, a lack of refresher training and feedback, witness characteristics, and the interview environment had an impact on the quality of their investigative interviews.

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Appendix Interview Protocol

Welcome and thank you

"Thank you for agreeing to take part in this research project. As outlined in the participant information sheet, my research is about police officers' experiences when conducting interviews with children and other vulnerable witnesses using the guidelines outlined in the Achieving Best evidence protocols (2011). I am interested in this because gaining an understanding of practitioners' perspectives may inform further research and improve training for police officers in this field.

This interview is about your views when conducting ABE interviews. I am really interested in your thoughts and experiences when interviewing.

Do you have any questions?"

Reiterate anonymity, data security and limits of confidentiality

Provide consent form to sign

Provide demographics sheet for completion

Demographics questionnaire

Age: Gender:

How long have you been a police officer?

In what year were you ABE trained?

Check interviewee happy to start, switch on recorder

Personal change

1. Soon after your ABE training, what was your experience of conducting ABE interviews?
2. Can you tell me about your experience when conducting the interviews now?
3. Do you feel differently now about conducting the interviews?

Context change

1. Do you think there have been any changes, politically or in public opinion, that have impacted on how you conduct ABE interviews?
2. Have you noticed any changes from within your work environment which affect how you conduct ABE interviews?

Prompts

Can you tell me more about that?

Could you give me an example of...?

What did you mean by...?

How did that make you feel?

Ending the interview:

Is there anything you would like to add?

Do you have any questions?

Are you OK to finish?

Switch off recorder