



Investigators' Views on the Applicability of Interviewing Best-Practices in Gathering Information From Autistic Sexual Offenders



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ABSTRACT

There is evidence that an elevated proportion of adults convicted of sexual offences against children are autistic. When investigators seek to gather information from these offenders, the risk for miscommunication is high. There is limited guidance on the most effective questioning styles for investigators to use with autistic offenders. In the current study, the utility of best-practice interviewing techniques for this cohort was explored. Nine investigators who regularly monitor persons on the Child Protection Offender Registry were trained in autism awareness and general vulnerable witness interviewing best-practices. Subsequently, they were interviewed about their perceptions of the interview training with regards to its applicability for questioning autistic offenders. The findings provide insight into strategies that may be particularly

helpful for establishing rapport with autistic respondents, namely the use of structured open-ended questions and narrative practice. The findings also complement previous quantitative research on questioning techniques that are effective with autistic respondents, suggesting that appropriate scaffolding is necessary. However, the potential disadvantages of asking specific questions with reluctant autistic respondents was also highlighted. These results suggest promising avenues for enhancing the quality of information-gathering conversations with autistic respondents, which warrant further investigation through systematic quantitative research.

Key Words: *Autism Spectrum Disorder, Investigative interviewing, Open-ended questions, Rapport, Narrative practice*

Introduction

Anecdotal reports and a growing body of evidence indicate that when autistic people commit offences, they are at a heightened risk of engaging in sexual offences, including those against children (Margari et al., 2024). This behaviour appears to arise not because of sexual deviance, but due to the symptomology associated with Autism Spectrum Disorder, such as Theory of Mind deficits, and broader contextual factors, like inadequate sexual education (see Allely & Dubin, 2008, for a review). When neurodivergent and neurotypical individuals are convicted of sexual offences against children, many jurisdictions place these individuals on a child protection offender registry (CPOR), which is accessible to law enforcement to monitor risk and help prevent recidivism (e.g., Murphy et al., 2009). To enable effective monitoring, CPOR investigators must elicit high-quality and relevant information from these offenders (Powell et al., 2014).

Eliciting information from convicted sexual offenders is challenging for various reasons, including the stigma associated with the offence (Quinn et al., 2004). These challenges, well-documented with neurotypical offenders (Read et al., 2014), are compounded when offenders are autistic.¹ Autism is marked by impairments in social and communicative abilities, which heighten the risk for miscommunication (Heasman & Gillespie, 2018; Jaswal & Akhtar, 2018) and poor evaluation judgements (Enriquez et al., 2024). Research also indicates that police and autistic people have low rates of satisfaction with the nature of their interactions (Crane et al., 2016; Gibbs & Haas, 2020). These issues are likely to arise, at least in part, due to two-

way misunderstandings between autistic and non-autistic people during interactions, a phenomenon known as the double empathy problem (Milton, 2012). Due to the potential for such communication break-downs, it is important to support high-quality information-gathering conversations between law enforcement and autistic sexual offenders. Indeed, police themselves have expressed the desire for more communication skills when interacting with autistic individuals (Crane et al., 2016); however, previous research provides limited insight into the questioning styles most suitable for this purpose.

The current study was conducted as a first step towards exploring the potential applicability of best-practices for interviewing vulnerable witnesses to gathering information from autistic sexual offenders. To achieve this aim, CPOR investigators and forensic behavioural services officers who monitor registered sexual offenders were trained in vulnerable witness interviewing best practices. They were then asked about their perspectives on the usefulness of the skills developed in the course, and adaptations that need to be made with autistic offenders. Before introducing our study, we provide a broad overview of research on questioning approaches, including those tailored for autistic interviewees, to provide context for our work.

Previous research points to the efficacy of best-practice questioning principles for eliciting detailed and accurate information from vulnerable witnesses of varying

¹ We use the term 'autistic' rather than 'with autism,' aligning with research indicating that many autistic

individuals favour identity-first language over person-first language (e.g., Bury, 2023).

characteristics (e.g., people with intellectual disabilities, children), and also supports the effectiveness of these techniques with neurotypical sexual offenders (Brown & Lamb, 2015; Read et al., 2014). A key component of these best practices is reliance on open-ended questions: questions that encourage an elaborate response without directing the respondent to report specific types of information (e.g., “Tell me everything that happened?”) (Powell & Snow, 2007). Open-ended questions consistently produce more elaborate and accurate responses from many groups of children and adults compared to responses elicited by specific questions (e.g., “Where did that happen?”) (Lamb et al., 2018; Vrij et al., 2014).

Since vulnerable witnesses often provide relatively brief responses when invited to give an initial narrative account, they benefit from the nuanced use of various subtypes of open-ended questions to scaffold and enhance their provision of narrative detail (Lamb et al., 2018; Powell & Snow, 2007). The emphasis on consistent high-quality prompting to facilitate respondents’ narratives can be contrasted with protocols which aim to maximise the respondent’s initial free narrative in response to relatively minimal prompting. For instance, the Cognitive Interview, a widely used protocol that is highly effective in eliciting event details from cooperative adult witnesses in particular (Memon et al., 2010), involves various social and cognitive strategies to maximise respondents’ narratives (e.g., memory techniques such as mental context reinstatement which encourages interviewees to mentally re-visualise the event), prior to subsequent probing about the event (e.g., Fisher & Geiselman, 2010).

In best-practice guidelines for interviewing vulnerable witnesses, open-ended questions are supported by other techniques, including a gentle questioning pace and preparatory activities that holistically support respondents in providing narrative detail (e.g., Brubacher & Powell, 2024). These techniques can also help build and maintain rapport, which may aid the elicitation of accurate information from autistic respondents, who experience unique memory challenges in social interactions (Maras, Norris, et al., 2020). One best-practice technique that may aid rapport-building is narrative practice, a preparatory activity included in many child interview protocols (e.g., National Institute of Child Health and Human

Development (NICHD); Lamb et al., 2018), and a form of this activity is also recommended in the Cognitive Interview (Geiselman & Fisher, 2014). In the version of narrative practice developed originally for child interviews, respondents are asked open-ended questions about a past neutral event from their lives (e.g., a recent outing), before the discussion of substantive issues. This activity helps to familiarise respondents to open-ended questions and can help establish rapport with the interviewer, as it provides an opportunity for the interviewer to show sincere interest in the respondent (Lamb et al., 2018; Roberts et al., 2011). Other elements of best-practice interviewing protocols, including open-ended questions, are also likely to build rapport. Indeed, while open-ended questions are more effortful for respondents to answer than specific questions, they help them to feel listened to and valued by the interviewer (Brubacher et al., 2019; Powell & Cauchi, 2013).

Little is known about the communication styles most conducive to gathering

information from autistic sexual offenders. Indeed, the most effective interviewing practices for autistic respondents is a relatively novel area of enquiry. Most research on this topic has explored the efficacy of different question types in the context of eyewitness interviews. In these studies, autistic participants are interviewed about a pleasant or neutral event and the amount and accuracy of information that interviewees provide is analysed (see Maras & Bowler, 2014, for a review). These studies find that approaches aimed at eliciting narratives with relatively minimal prompting are not appropriate for autistic respondents who often provide shorter, and sometimes less accurate, accounts than neurotypical respondents (e.g., Maras & Bowler, 2010; Maras et al., 2012; Maras et al., 2013). Approaches that aim to maximise autistic respondents' narratives without sufficient scaffolding may even have a negative impact. Maras and Bowler (2010) found when autistic adults were interviewed about a mock crime (video), the Cognitive Interview did not elicit a higher number of correct details compared to a standard interview procedure (which did not involve the same memory mnemonics but was otherwise comparable). Additionally, the Cognitive Interview elicited more incorrect details, resulting in lower overall accuracy compared to neurotypical witnesses.

There are several reasons why autistic respondents may struggle to provide relevant and sufficient detail when providing a narrative (see Maras, 2021, for an overview). These reasons include reduced ability to understand the implicit requirements of the recall task (White, 2013), discrepancies in how autistic and neurotypical individuals interpret experiences and thus organise these events in memory (e.g., Zalla et al., 2013), as well as

reduced ability to recall specific events in time (Geng et al., 2024), and in monitoring the origin of their memories (Damiani et al., 2021)

Given the difficulty some autistic people experience when asked to provide a narrative account, best-practice interview styles could be adapted to provide further structure, such as pairing open-ended and specific questions. Indeed, one study showed that autistic adults were able to produce more specific and relevant details to open-ended questions if they were followed up with verbal-visual prompting support, which consisted of specific questions printed on a pie chart (e.g., what, when, where, who, how, why; Norris et al., 2020). In a cohort of autistic and non-autistic 6- to 15-year-olds, autistic children provided less information in response to open-ended questions than their typically-developing peers but the information they did provide was comparable in accuracy (Almeida et al., 2019) and narrative coherence (i.e., how clear and logically organised their responses were) (Almeida et al., 2024). Their findings suggested that when using open-ended questions with autistic respondents, high-quality follow-up prompting is key. Indeed, Almeida et al. (2019) found particular support for a specific subtype of open-ended question: depth questions, which focus respondents on pre-disclosed information and encourage elaboration (e.g., You said [pre-disclosed detail], tell me more about that?), since these prompts elicited more information from both groups than all other prompt types, including specific questions (see also Denne et al., 2024). Thus, the current research base suggests interview protocols which help to scaffold recall may be particularly effective for autistic respondents (e.g., Almeida et al., 2019, 2024; Denne et al.,

2024; Maras, Dando, et al., 2020; Norris et al., 2020).

There are at least three reasons to expect that some recommendations from eyewitness memory studies may not generalise to interactions with autistic offenders. First, sexual offenders are typically reluctant to share information (Read et al., 2014) and autistic people may also lack trust in police, especially if they have had previous negative experiences (Crane et al., 2016). Conversely, participants in eyewitness studies have little motivation to withhold information and have demonstrated interest and initiative by signing up for the study. Second, the utility of various communication styles are likely to differ according to the type of information that investigators seek to elicit. While the aim of eyewitness interviews is to maximise the amount and accuracy of detail elicited about a specific past event, CPOR investigators aim to gather broad information about lifestyle, psychological, and behavioural factors. This wide scope of information is necessary in their role of monitoring persons convicted of sexual offences who are released into the community, with the goal of identifying and minimising the risk of recidivism. Finally, the context of these information-gathering scenarios differ. The interactions led by CPOR investigators are less formal than police interviews and respondents (offenders) are not notified in advance of the investigators' visit. Conversely, eyewitness interviews are typically conducted at a police station (or laboratory), and the interviewee often expects the interview to occur. Hence, while the aims of investigative interviews and the information-gathering conversations of CPOR officers share common goals—including building rapport and maximising the elicitation of relevant and accurate

information—the questioning approach most helpful to eliciting information from *eyewitnesses* and *offenders* on the autism spectrum may differ.

The current study explored the potential applicability of best-practices for interviewing vulnerable witnesses in gathering information from autistic sexual offenders listed on a CPOR. A qualitative approach was chosen to provide flexibility in the scope of the findings and allow comprehensive insight into the first-hand experiences of CPOR investigators in the field, with the aim of guiding future quantitative research. In the study, CPOR investigators and forensic behavioural services officers (who work alongside CPOR investigators) were trained in autism awareness, including common characteristics of Autism Spectrum Disorder, and then trained in general vulnerable witness interviewing best-practices. The interviewing training that the participants completed was established as highly effective in teaching best-practice interview skills, including the utilisation of high-quality open-ended question prompting, with learning benefits sustained even a year following completion (Benson & Powell, 2015). The focus of this study was to evaluate the usefulness of these best-practice questioning skills for CPOR investigators and forensic behavioural services officers. To achieve this aim, the participants were asked about their perceptions of the utility of the interviewing training for their role, and whether any adaptations were necessary to the questioning skills they were taught.

METHOD

Participants

An email was sent out to all police officers specialising as child protection offender registry investigators and forensic behavioural services officers (who work alongside CPOR investigators) in an Australian jurisdiction requesting their participation. Of the 18 professionals who responded and commenced the training, nine completed the training program and could be included in this study. Other potential participants primarily faced challenges balancing the demands of the training course with their professional responsibilities, which prevented them from completing the course within the specified timeframe of approximately six months. All trainees who completed the training in that timeframe were involved in this study.

The sample included six female and three male participants. Most were highly experienced investigators, with an average of 14.63 years of experience ($SD = 9.13$, $range = .67$ – 35 years), and thus had considerable experience gathering information from convicted sexual offenders, including those suspected to be or diagnosed as autistic. Most had previously completed another form of specialised training in interviewing vulnerable witnesses ($n = 6$), or had received generalist interviewing training ($n = 1$). One participant had not received any prior interviewing training and one participant did not answer this question. The methodology for this study is reported in accordance with the Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research (COREQ). Please refer to the Open Science Framework (OSF; https://osf.io/etvnx/?view_only=54502433fd7b4676bf24ee8b458952bd) for the complete checklist.

Materials and Procedure

Online Training

All of the participants completed an online training course that provided an overview of best-practice interviewing styles, focusing on micro-skills for communicating with vulnerable individuals. The content was relevant, but not specific to autistic respondents. The course was self-paced and took approximately 20 hours to complete in total. Participants took an average of 117.11 days ($SD = 48.12$) to complete the content: The completion time for participants 1–8 ranged from 3 to 5 months. The final participant, who was granted an extension due to being close to completion at the initial cutoff date, completed the course in 7.5 months. During the training period, all participants continued their regular duties, including gathering information from convicted sexual offenders.

The training involved six modules that consisted of a variety of activities that have been shown to support long-term changes in communication skills, including the utilisation of high-quality open-ended prompting (e.g., Benson & Powell, 2015). These communication skills were taught through a variety of evidence-based activities which included a series of readings, videos, identification of different question-types, quizzes, and reflection exercises (e.g., Powell, 2008, Yii et al., 2014). Throughout the training program, participants completed three structured mock interviews based on a field-relevant case scenario, conducted via phone with an expert trainer (research fellow). The mock interviews provided trainees the opportunity to practise best-practice questioning styles, and to receive individualised feedback.

Research Interviews

Once the participants completed the online training, they participated in an interview over video conference with a research fellow who was not involved in any part of the questioning training. Most participants (Participants 1-7) completed the research interview shortly after the training. For these participants, the interview took place an average of 2.86 days after the training ($SD = 2.40$). Two additional trainees (Participants 8 and 9) completed the training at a later time: although they were not initially included in the study due to practical constraints, they were invited to participate to explore the applicability of the questioning training in their role over a longer period with additional opportunities to use the training tools. These participants were interviewed 288 and 518 days after completing the training. Any thematic differences between the perspectives of these latter participants and the earlier cohort are noted in the results.

In the interview, participants were asked about (a) their perceptions of the interview training with regards to its applicability for questioning autistic offenders, (b) whether and how they adapted the interviewing guidelines when they questioned autistic offenders, and (c) their (further) training needs regarding how to apply interviewing best practices with this population (if any). These questions were asked in semi-structured interview format to enable the interviewer to request elaboration on topics raised by each participant. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Data Analysis

To analyse the data, a 'codebook' approach to Thematic Analysis was adopted (Braun & Clarke, 2019). This method provides a

structured framework to guide the analysis, while allowing for the flexibility inherent to qualitative analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2020). Codebook approaches to Thematic Analysis are well-suited to the aims of applied research, such as exploring the perspectives of practitioners and participants (Braun & Clarke, 2020). The analysis was inductive, with codes and themes generated directly from the data rather than being predetermined by an existing theoretical framework. The analytic process broadly followed the six phases of thematic analysis described by Braun and Clarke (2006), but this process was adapted to include a list of codes that facilitated categorisation of the data.

This analytic process initially involved familiarisation which involved reading the transcripts to develop a thorough understanding of the content and to identify prominent themes. A preliminary list of codes and definitions was developed at this point, guided by data familiarisation. In the next phase, SD systematically coded recurring patterns, meanings, and content, and in accordance with these codes, extracted and categorised relevant data. This second stage was iterative: while a set of codes were developed based on the data familiarisation, new codes were identified during the coding process and added to the evolving list. When new codes were identified, the researcher revisited the relevant transcripts to ensure that all text corresponding to these newly identified categories was properly documented. Quotes that embodied similar concepts were grouped together in Microsoft Excel. Following this systematic coding process, themes and subthemes were generated by comparing and contrasting the

identified codes to capture patterns of similarity and difference.

The first author (SD) led the analysis and collaborated with MP to discuss the data and refine themes, guiding the analytic process. In the final stage of analysis, SD prepared a summary and detailed description of the final themes, including representative quotes, which were reviewed and agreed upon by the entire research team. The final themes are presented below, accompanied by de-identified and edited quotes for readability.

RESULTS

Three overarching themes were apparent: the utility of vulnerable witness interviewing training, the effectiveness of best-practice interview guidelines with autistic offenders, and further training needs. Each of these themes and corresponding subthemes are explained in more detail below.

The Utility of Vulnerable Witness Interviewing Training

There was consensus that the interviewing training extended the participants' existing set of skills. This was the case even though almost all participants were highly experienced and had received some degree of interviewing training in the past. The responses indicated that the area of greatest development was skill acquisition in using open-ended questions. The participants reflected on how they had used open-ended questions to varying degrees prior to beginning the course. For example, one participant noted they had been doing a 'half-decent job' of using these question-types previously, whereas another trainee expressed that while they thought they had been using substantial proportions of open-

ended questions during their interactions, they were now aware that this was not the case.

The participants gave examples of the ways that the course improved their knowledge and skill in using open-ended questions. For example, several reflected on how the course helped them to distinguish between open-ended depth and breadth questions, with the latter question type being broader in scope (e.g., "Tell me everything that happened?"). They explained that the course prepared them to strategically use these subtypes of open-ended prompts to engage in follow-up prompting that facilitates the elicitation of a flowing and coherent narrative. Additionally, the participants reflected on how they expanded their phrasing of open-ended questions, which gave them greater ability to persist with an open-ended approach without having to resort to specific questions. Several trainees also observed that the course helped them to phrase open-ended questions more naturally in their conversations; a shift which allowed them to focus more on the content shared by the interviewee.

The course gave me more insight into how I speak to offenders. It also improved my ability to focus on offenders' narratives instead of just ensuring that I'm meeting specific checklist items of information ... That's important because without eliciting a narrative, we just don't know what's going on in their lives.
(Participant 4)

The participants reflected on how the course improved their awareness and skills in other elements of best-practice interviewing. For example, they commonly referred to improved understanding of how to approach conversations to help offenders feel more comfortable, with many noting the rapport-

building role of preparatory activities such as narrative practice. Relatedly, the participants expressed enhanced confidence in navigating interactions with reluctant offenders. Several reflected on past interactions with offenders in which it was challenging to gather information and provided examples of open-ended strategies they would now use if they encountered a similar situation again.

It was also common for the participants to reflect on improved pacing, noting they had slowed down their questioning since completing the course. Indeed, one participant who was interviewed after a long delay, and had many years of experience interviewing vulnerable witnesses previously, shared that patience was the skill they had learned most from the course:

I've always used silence as part of my questioning technique, but the course made me realize how easy it is to rush. Patience is key. Even with autistic people who seem reasonably articulate, I learned that you need to take more time and listen carefully. I've adapted my listening more than my questioning as a result of the training. (Participant 9)

Underlying the participants' reflections of the various skills developed in the course was a consensus that it had improved their awareness of how they interact with offenders. For example, the participants stated they had greater awareness of the types of questions they asked and reported being more thoughtful in their use.

Overall I learnt more self-awareness – I'm more aware of how I am asking my questions. Now I can recognise whether a question is not just open, but open-breadth or open-depth, and I'm more thoughtful about how to use these prompts to elicit detailed information. (Participant 6)

The Effectiveness of Best-Practice Interview Techniques With Autistic Offenders

The participants reflected on the utility of best-practice interview guidelines with autistic offenders, and there were three subthemes: open-ended questions foster rapport, questions that provide appropriate scaffolding facilitate the elicitation of information, and the utility of other elements of best-practice interviewing.

Open-ended Questions Foster Rapport

The participants reflected on how building rapport (i.e., establishing a trusting relationship) was critical to their role, and there was consensus that open-ended questions help to build rapport with autistic offenders. Typically, offenders have had negative experiences with police, especially in connection to their index offence. Many offenders were initially charged after police arrived unannounced at their residence with a search warrant, and searched their possessions, and seized personal items (e.g., computers). For many, this experience was highly stressful. When CPOR investigators visit registered offenders, they similarly turn up at offenders' residence unannounced, which can elicit high levels of stress. The participants perceived that this was particularly the case for autistic individuals, who might be more sensitive to the invasion of personal space and disrupted routines. It was noted that offenders are often anxious at the outset of their visits, so establishing rapport is critical to enabling CPOR investigators to fulfill their role in gathering information to effectively assess and minimise the risk of recidivism.

When we visit them, they don't know that we're coming, so that in itself causes a lot of stress.

It's really important to have those tools to be able to make them comfortable and at ease, because if the first interaction is stressful and they feel anxious, it usually results in them shutting down. It's important to have those tools to give them time to settle in, process the information, build rapport, and to be clear in questioning. (Participant 2)

The effectiveness of open-ended questions in fostering a good relationship between offenders and CPOR investigators was emphasised. It was perceived that open-ended questions help to dispel offenders' perceptions of CPOR investigators as authoritarian figures and help to build a relationship based on trust and mutual cooperation. The participants perceived that open-ended questions foster cooperative interactions because they platform the respondent to share their perspective. Rather than the officer leading the discussion and posing specific questions for the offender to respond to, the participants indicated that skill in using open-ended questions equips the officer to navigate the offenders' narrative and perspective. When this occurs, offenders feel like they can share their story on their own terms, have a sense of control over the direction of the conversation, and can share what they think is most relevant. The participants gave examples of how these open-ended question types facilitated cooperation and a trusting relationship, which enabled the offender to share their story and perspective, leading to the provision of sufficient information for an effective risk assessment. One case example is provided below, and a more detailed case example is provided on [OSF](#).

One offender was having a lot of trouble being honest with us about his sexual behaviour because there is a lot of shame involved– but

that's what we have to ask about because their sexual behaviour is part of their forensic risk. My colleague was able to gently ask this offender open-ended questions, which allowed him to tell his story and how his offending fit into his life overall. He shared information in his own way and we gained enough information from him without feeling like we forced it out of him. (Participant 5)

Questions that Provide Appropriate Scaffolding Facilitate the Elicitation of Information

The participants perceived that well-structured open-ended questions can facilitate the elicitation of comprehensive and relevant information from autistic offenders, including their experiences and perspectives. In comparison, specific questions often elicit shorter and more narrow responses. Participants perceived that because open-ended prompts have positive effects on rapport building and give autistic offenders a voice, offenders are more likely to open up and share what is actually happening. Moreover, because the offender leads the narrative, this questioning style enables the discovery of information that the interviewer could not anticipate. There was consensus that a narrative account, facilitated through the utilisation of high-quality follow-up questions, helps CPOR investigators to understand what is happening in offenders' lives.

It's important to use open-ended questions to elicit broad information so we don't miss something –because there could be something that they want to tell us but they don't get the opportunity to. (Participant 7)

We may see an offender once or twice a year, so it's really important that we get as much information as possible from that short

interaction. It's important to have them tell us what's on their mind and let them lead the conversation because there might be areas that we haven't thought of, or details that haven't been disclosed before. (Participant 2)

The participants highlighted the need for appropriate scaffolding when using open-ended questions with autistic offenders. They noted that autistic respondents may be unsure of what information to report to very broad open-ended questions. Several of the participants, and especially the two interviewed after a longer delay, commented that autistic respondents find it easier to reply to specific questions, since these involve clear instruction concerning what information is requested. Although open-ended questions were perceived as effortful for autistic respondents, many of the participants were optimistic about the utility of these questions when structured appropriately. They explained that open-ended questions could be scaffolded in a way that focused the offender on specific types of information, such as through the use of narrower breadth (e.g., "What was the first thing that happened?") and depth questions (e.g., "What happened when [predisclosed detail]").

People with autism don't seem to fill in the blanks easily, which can be necessary to respond to open-ended questions. I find those direct, straightforward questions, like "do you have child exploitation material on your phone?" can be necessary. But I think they respond well to smaller open-ended questions, like about an event rather than a topic. For example, "Tell me everything you know about soccer" is too broad, especially if that's a topic that they're interested in – there's too much to say and they won't know where to start. But if I

say, "Tell me about the game that you played on Saturday, start at the beginning" – they can pepper their way through that. (Participant 9)

In addition to the use of structured open-ended prompting to elicit a narrative, several participants noted that specific questions could be integrated with an open-ended questioning style to provide further structure. Participants generally prioritised specific questions that require the interviewee to generate a response (i.e., Wh- questions, such as "Who was there?") as opposed to closed questions which allow the respondent to select a response provided by the investigator (e.g., "yes/no"), though the participants noted that closed questions can sometimes be necessary. One participant noted that because CPOR investigators are generally trying to assess the risk of reoffending rather than information about specific crimes and offences, specific questions may be required to elicit precise types of information that is necessary for assessing recidivism risk.

If you leave open-ended questions too broad, they won't know how to respond. But if you break them down a bit – they can be really effective. I've had some excellent recounts from autistic people where they will give you so much detail about the situation that you'd never get out of someone who is neurotypical. Sometimes they'll also need a specific question to work off because these questions are clear about what information is being requested. (Participant 8)

Although the participants described how specific questions could help focus autistic respondents on specific types of information, they noted that these prompts sometimes allowed offenders to provide minimal information. Such questions can often be adequately answered within a few words (e.g.,

“Where did it happen?”), making it easier for respondents to provide shorter responses. Participants observed that when offenders are reluctant to share information or want the questioning to end swiftly, they often provide such brief responses. It was observed that the tendency to provide brief responses to specific questions was especially pronounced when the question was closed. These prompts allow interviewees to simply choose an answer provided by the investigator (e.g., answering ‘yes’ to a specific yes/no question). It was also perceived that closed questions can mask non-compliance, as autistic offenders may try to answer in desirable ways. In comparison, this pattern of responding is difficult for offenders to maintain when they are asked prompts that seek a narrative, as illustrated by the following quotes:

One of the things we often find is that, if someone doesn't want you to be there, they'll tell you what you want to hear – especially with people that don't want you in their house. Autistic people are often very uncomfortable with other people in their safe place, like their bedroom, and they'll tell you anything to get you out of there: they'll just nod or say 'yes' to everything. Being able to ask them questions where 'yes' isn't an answer is very useful in our role. (Participant 5)

Open-ended questions are helpful to get their opinions and perceptions more accurately, instead of just yes-no or other one-word answers. (Participant 1)

Due to their experience, our participants were aware of the variability in how autistic respondents present and their differing abilities to respond to open-ended questions. To balance the benefits and drawbacks of asking open-ended and specific questions

respectively, a funnelled approach to questioning was recommended. It was perceived that a questioning structure that elicits a narrative through open-ended follow-up questions, and becomes more specific as needed, is a helpful way to tailor discussions on a case-by-case basis.

If the open-ended questioning approach isn't working, we can try and narrow it down make it a bit more specific...When you've met one autistic person, you've met one autistic person, so you really can't use one blanket approach to questioning. (Participant 3)

Sometimes when you use open-ended questions, autistic people will struggle to know specifically what you mean. I don't think that's an issue because you can start with the broader open-ended questions to elicit a narrative and if they seem to struggle, you can narrow down the focus—scaffolding those questions more. If that still doesn't get them on track, you can use more specific questions to further narrow the focus of your interview. (Participant 1)

Participants noted that the preparatory stages of the interview, and narrative practice in particular, could guide their approach. Asking autistic offenders open-ended prompts about a positive event or topic can inform the investigator of that individual's ability to answer open-ended questions in the substantive phase of the conversation, and provide indication of whether additional structuring may be needed.

Other Best-Practice Interviewing Techniques

The participants considered the value of other elements of best-practice interviewing practices during their interactions with autistic offenders. Narrative practice was perceived as particularly effective. The participants explained that autistic

respondents often have specialised interests, so initiating a conversation about a topic or event of interest is very effective in building rapport and helping the offender to relax. Several participants reflected that autistic individuals are often not interacted with in a respectful way due to how they present, and they are socially marginalised. When they feel respected and comfortable, autistic respondents appreciate the opportunity to share information.

There was one guy and his special interest was detailing cars. We came to the door, and he was really hostile, angry, and scared. He was in fight or flight mode. My partner said, "oh is that your car?" and the offender stopped, looked at him, and just went, "yes - what of it?". My partner said, "it's beautiful and clean" and then the offender's demeanour changed entirely, and he started talking about the car and about detailing cars. We spoke to him for probably 20 minutes about his car detailing. Within 20 minutes he invited us into the house and offered us a cup of tea. He was very apologetic about his initial behaviour, and we could have a further discussion. (Participant 1)

One of the big things to consider in our interactions, especially for people with autism, is that they're much more comfortable with a structure. They want people to follow the rules. Being able to pre-warn them how the conversation is going to pan out, and being able to give them a practice, is really helpful. (Participant 5)

The value of silence and slow pacing of dialogue with autistic offenders was also emphasized. Several participants noted that autistic offenders may take longer to process information than neurotypical individuals. This ability to process information is further impeded during CPOR visits, because

offenders feel stressed and overwhelmed. Silence and slow pacing were perceived as valuable tools to allow the offender adequate time to process information.

Further Training Needs

Most of the participants indicated a preference for refresher training in questioning. Even brief refreshers were perceived as useful, such as a mock interview with feedback every year. The participants also indicated that they would value from refresher training in identifying autistic individuals. Finally, participants expressed the desire for insights on how to enhance autistic persons understanding of their rights, since they may have poor self-protective instincts and implicate themselves when questioned.

DISCUSSION

Research suggests that autistic individuals may be at heightened risk of committing sexual offences against children (Allely & Dubin, 2008; Margari et al., 2024). Gathering information from autistic offenders presents unique challenges, as the risk of miscommunication and misunderstanding is high (Milton, 2012). The overriding finding of this study was the adaptability of vulnerable witness questioning principles in fostering an environment conducive to information sharing in this context. The participants perceived that such principles held potential to enhance rapport and the willingness of offenders to share information, and to elicit information that helped to meet the investigators' information-gathering requirements. These considerations, and additional training needs, are discussed in greater detail below.

Open-ended questions and narrative practice were perceived as effective tools for fostering trust and rapport, particularly in contexts where offenders are reluctant to share information. Autistic offenders often were perceived to experience considerable levels of stress during CPOR investigators' visits due to various factors, including sensitivity to disruptions in their routine (American Psychiatric Association, 2013), and lack of trust in police due to previous negative experiences associated with their offending history (see also, Crane et al., 2016; Gibbs & Haas, 2020). Establishing rapport in these situations was regarded as key to eliciting information. Previous research has not, to our knowledge, explored strategies that are helpful for building rapport with autistic offenders. Thus, these qualitative findings provide insight into promising research directions for future quantitative research.

The participants described open-ended questioning as a supportive technique for autistic offenders, helping to dispel negative perceptions of the investigator, and enabling offenders to feel valued and heard in sharing their perspective which facilitated cooperation. This finding is consistent with research conducted with neurotypical populations (e.g., Powell & Cauchi, 2013). In one study, for example, convicted sex offenders perceived the interview process as more ethical when they were able to share their experiences and perspectives (Kebbell et al., 2006). Similarly, research indicates that children feel better listened to and able to share information when asked open-ended, rather than specific questions (Brubacher et al., 2019). It is possible that with autistic respondents, open-ended questions need to be asked with sufficient scaffolding to obtain these positive effects. When autistic and

neurotypical adults were interviewed about a short crime film, participants reported feeling more comfortable with interviews that used an approach designed to aid them in scaffolding their narrative account (the Witness-Aimed First Account approach), compared to those that prioritised a free-narrative followed by subsequent probing (Maras, Dando, et al., 2020). The finding that open-ended questions were perceived as effective in fostering rapport with autistic offenders should be further explored by investigating the perspective of autistic respondents themselves. Such as exploration would provide deeper insight into their experiences of being asked well-structured open-ended questions in comparison to specific questions, including their views of the interview process and the interviewer.

Narrative practice was identified as a valuable rapport-building activity with autistic offenders. Autistic people often have repetitive and fixed interests (American Psychiatric Association, 2013), and allowing them to freely speak about these personally meaningful experiences and interests while the interviewer shows sincere interest, could foster rapport (Lamb et al., 2018; Roberts et al., 2011). This finding complements previous work conducted with children which indicates that high-quality narrative practice helps children to be more informative in the substantive phase of the interview (Hershkowitz, 2009), and that for some neurotypical adults, narrative practice can enhance their comfort with the interview process (Brubacher et al., 2020). In addition to establishing rapport, narrative practice has been shown to provide cognitive benefits by assisting children in learning how to recall information in response to open-ended questions, which supports recall in the

substantive phase (Danby et al., 2017; Roberts et al., 2011). These benefits of narrative practice may similarly apply to autistic respondents, and whether this is the case is an important direction for future quantitative work. Such research could systematically explore the utility of narrative practice with autistic respondents to better understand its impact on rapport building, as well as its role in training the interviewee to respond to open-ended questions.

The findings of this study, based on the first-hand experiences of CPOR officers in the field, complement the results of previous quantitative research on the questioning techniques suitable for eliciting information from autistic witnesses. For instance, the participants' perceptions that autistic offenders cope better with structured than broad open-ended prompts aligns with research indicating that autistic respondents have difficulty providing a free-narrative account but can do so with appropriate question scaffolding (e.g., Almeida et al., 2019; 2024; Denne et al., 2024; Maras et al., 2012; Maras, Dando, et al., 2020; Maras et al., 2013). Indeed, research has found that autistic children can provide accurate narrative detail in response to high-quality open-ended prompts and respond particularly well to open-ended depth prompts—which provide structure by focusing respondents on previously disclosed information and requesting elaboration (Almeida et al., 2019; Denne et al., 2024). Another approach that has been found to assist autistic respondents is the Witness-Aimed First Account, which aids scaffolding by breaking down respondents' experience into constituent event components which are represented by visual aids (post-it notes) (Maras, Dando, et al., 2020). These event components and visual

aids are then used as anchors to invite narrative detail about each part of the event. When autistic and neurotypical adults were questioned using this approach, they provided more accurate and detailed information about a witnessed crime video than when they were questioned through a control interview which did not involve such scaffolding (Maras, Dando, et al., 2020).

The participants' reflections suggested that specific questions can help provide necessary scaffolding for autistic offenders. It was recommended that specific questions were introduced through a funnelled approach, which commences with open-ended prompting prior to the introduction of specific questions to tailor questioning to the particular abilities of each individual. The participants noted that autism is, indeed, a spectrum, and that offenders on this continuum have vastly differing levels of abilities. The perspective that specific questions can provide further structure for autistic respondents is supported by previous quantitative research, which has found that pairing open-ended and specific questions aids autistic interviewees in providing relevant information (Norris et al., 2020).

Despite the perceived benefits of specific questions, a limitation of this questioning style—particularly for autistic respondents who are reluctant—was clearly articulated. Participants observed that autistic offenders sometimes respond to specific questions by providing only the minimally required information. This perspective aligns with quantitative research showing that children often offer the minimally sufficient response to specific questions in forensic interviews (formal reticence) (Szojka et al., 2023), and that reluctant interviewees also tend to give

brief responses to specific questions (e.g., Brown & Lamb, 2015; Powell & Snow, 2007). This is especially the case when questions are closed (Powell & Snow, 2007), echoing the perspectives of participants in the current study. Although research indicates that autistic mock-witnesses can provide detailed responses to relatively broad specific questions (e.g., Norris et al., 2020), in contexts where autistic respondents are reluctant to share information, specific questions may not elicit the same detail. Future quantitative research should systematically examine the efficacy of different question types with reluctant autistic respondents, including autistic suspects, to provide more controlled insight into the efficacy of specific questions when autistic respondents are hesitant to share information. It will also be important for this research to consider different response patterns when autistic suspects are innocent or guilty (see Bagnall & Maras, 2025, for an overview).

Limitations

There were some limitations to the current study. The number of participants included was smaller than anticipated, as most individuals did not complete the interviewing training course within the cut-off date, which was determined by practical constraints. Despite the low sample size, the themes identified in each interview were markedly similar across the participants. These relatively homogenous views may have arisen because the participants who completed the training most expeditiously are likely to be those who perceived the value in using open-ended questions. Although participants were interviewed shortly after the training, they had opportunities to apply the skills they

were learning in the course in their role, as participants took 3–7.5 months to complete the training course. Moreover, the two additional participants interviewed after a longer delay provided insight into the value of training following the opportunity to employ these skills with offenders over a more sustained period of time. Many of the perspectives voiced by these participants aligned with those of the earlier cohort, but they placed greater emphasis on the need to tailor questioning to individuals, given the varying presentations and communicative abilities of autistic respondents. A direction for future research is to follow up with additional trainees who completed the vulnerable witness interviewing training after a longer time period.

There may have been some additional differences between trainees who completed the training within the specified time and were involved in the study, and those who did not. For instance, it is possible that trainees who participated had higher levels of conscientiousness or motivation, which aided them in completing the training alongside their existing work commitments (Kertechian, 2018). This consideration highlights a primary challenge of distributed online interviewing training: although spaced and incremental training is foundational for long-term skill retention (Brubacher et al., 2022), trainees often find it difficult to complete such training while balancing other commitments (Zekiroski et al., 2024).

Finally, although participants were asked about the applicability of the questioning practices for autistic offenders, many of the individuals the participants spoke of were suspected to be autistic, rather than identified as such via clinical diagnosis. Prior

to participating in the current study, the participants did receive training in identifying autism delivered by experts in autism. The training focused on the characteristics of autism and identifying associated symptomology, which should aid the validity of their suspected diagnoses. It is important, however, that future research further explores the applicability of these practices with individuals clinically diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder.

exploring the effects of best-practice interviewing techniques, particularly building rapport and structured open-ended questions, with reluctant autistic respondents.

CONCLUSION

Autistic individuals often communicate and interpret social interactions differently to neurotypical individuals, which can lead to two-way misunderstandings in information-gathering contexts (Milton, 2012). However, such misunderstandings are not inevitable. Decades of research indicate that changes in how personnel communicate with vulnerable people can lead to enhancements in the quality and quantity of information they obtain, as well as improved satisfaction with these interactions (e.g., Hershkowitz, 2009; Lamb et al., 2018 Powell & Snow, 2007). In the current study, CPOR investigators and forensic behavioural services officers expressed that vulnerable witness interviewing training enhanced their skill set and increased their ability to use interviewing best-practices for interviewing autistic offenders. These practices were perceived as valuable in achieving their aims, as they helped establish rapport and led to the provision of comprehensive information, enabling them to identify risk more holistically and better support offenders. Future quantitative research should complement these findings by systematically

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