

Poor Practices and Precise Criticism: Revisiting the Reid Debate 15 Years Later

Op-ed by Dr. Joseph Eastwood



Joseph Eastwood¹

¹ Associate Professor of Forensic Psychology, Faculty of Social Science and Humanities, Ontario Tech University, Ontario, Canada

Corresponding author:

Joseph.Eastwood@ontariotechu.ca



OPINION

Back in 2011, when I was a zealous if somewhat naïve graduate student, I engaged in an exchange with James Adcock in this journal related to the Reid Technique. The two articles were entitled “Is the Reid technique really the problem” (Adcock) and “Is the Reid Technique really the solution” (mine). I was reminded of this exchange recently after reading an article in my local newspaper (Toronto, Canada) about an overturned guilty verdict in a high-profile homicide case (Donovan, 2025). The reason for the reversal was the exclusion of the suspect’s confession due to the oppressive nature of the police interview, including lack of sleep, cold room, lack of food, and aggressive questioning over the course of a 13-hour interaction. I expect for those readers in North America at least – that despite progress in implementing ethical and evidence-based interviewing practices – similar examples can still be found relatively easily.

What caught my attention, however, was the journalist’s conclusion about the primary culprit for the poor practice and outcome: “*Peel police were desperate for a confession. So the officer applied the Reid interrogation technique...*”. And then before the proverbial ink was even dry on the article, the Reid organization released a detailed statement outlining how none of the practices present in the case were contained within its training or approach (see Inbau et al., 2011). So, almost 15 years later, it appears that we still haven’t answered the original two questions. Being significantly older, and one hopes slightly wiser, I’d like to take a second crack at

addressing them and providing a potential pathway forward in this discussion.

The first question to re-tackle is whether the Reid technique is really the problem. When it comes to the interviewing practices seen in the aforementioned case, and many like it, I believe the answer is “no”. Yes, there are elements of the approach that are deeply problematic; in particular the use of highly questionable behavioural cues to detect deception and the resulting pressure to shut down dialogue unless it fits the interviewer’s expectations. Few of those within the field, whether academic or practitioner, are unaware of its shortcomings. But it is lazy and irresponsible to blindly blame all poor interviewing practices on the Reid technique. Within the current case example, Reid’s manual clearly states that interviewers should always meet the suspect’s physical needs and carefully monitor the length of the interview to ensure the statement is voluntary. Sometimes bad practices are just bad practices.

And it’s not just journalists who participate in this blame-shifting drift. Within academic circles Reid has also become synonymous with bad interviewing – part boogie man and part whipping boy. It is hard to find a conference presentation or journal article on suspect interviewing that doesn’t begin by equating Reid with any and all coercive and problematic interviewing practices – even those that the technique explicitly denounces. As some readers are likely aware, this has recently led to legal problems for some of those criticizing

the technique. Yes, Reid has problems, but it isn't the only problem.

If Reid isn't the problem, or at least the entirety of the problem, then does it represent the solution to poor interviewing practices? Again, and perhaps even more resoundingly, I believe the answer is "no". Even if implemented exactly as written in the manual, using the Reid technique as it stands today is, or should be, untenable. The use of behavior provoking questions and reading body language to determine the likelihood of a suspect's guilt is deeply problematic and unsupported by the empirical literature. The statement of an unequivocal belief in the suspect's guilt risks destroying rapport and shutting down the suspect's engagement in the process. The refusal to allow dialogue unless it aligns with the interviewer's beliefs is both potentially oppressive and counterproductive to the goal of gathering the maximal amount of information. While it isn't responsible for all poor interviewing practices, Reid isn't the fix for them either.

So where do we go from here so we can stop having the same conversation every decade and a half? First, we need to be precise in our criticism of Reid. There is a tendency with this topic to fall into the proverbial broken telephone – we cite what Dr. X has summarized about Dr. Y's conceptualization of what the Reid approach endorses and contains. But how many of us commenting on the approach have read the Reid Manual in its entirety? Spoiler alert: it's really long. If we want our critiques to be credible, we need to be careful that we know what Reid actually proposes versus what we have assumed or characterized it to involve. There is enough to critique within the model without going beyond what it espouses. When we dissect

poor interviewing practices, we need to be more scalpel and less bone saw in our approach.

Second, regardless of the cause of a given problematic interviewing behaviour, the ultimate road forward is to show that we have real (if tentative) solutions. Research and practice have evolved since the 1960's, and we have better understanding of what is effective and what is counterproductive when questioning suspects. Rather than attempting to overwhelm suspects with evidence, use it strategically to objectively verify the veracity of their account. Instead of shutting down dialogue, remain willing to listen to the suspect's perspective. Avoid assuming guilt based on questionable behavioural cues and remain open-minded regarding their involvement throughout. While work (always) remains to be done, we have a better way as represented in dialogue-based rapport-driven approaches. And who is better suited to further uncover and spread these solutions than organizations like iIIRG that bring academics and practitioners together to improve interviewing practices?

If I've learned one thing since the original exchange in 2011, it is that progress is slow, uncertain, and uneven. Good fights are usually slow ones. Is it depressing to read about a suspect interview being tossed in 2025 because of a lack of basic principles of ethical and effective interviewing? Absolutely. But this just shows us that work remains to be done and the initiatives driven by iIIRG and others are more needed than ever. So let us be precise in our criticism and persistent in our commitment to promoting evidence-based practices. And maybe, just maybe, we can avoid having this conversation again a couple of decades down the road.

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