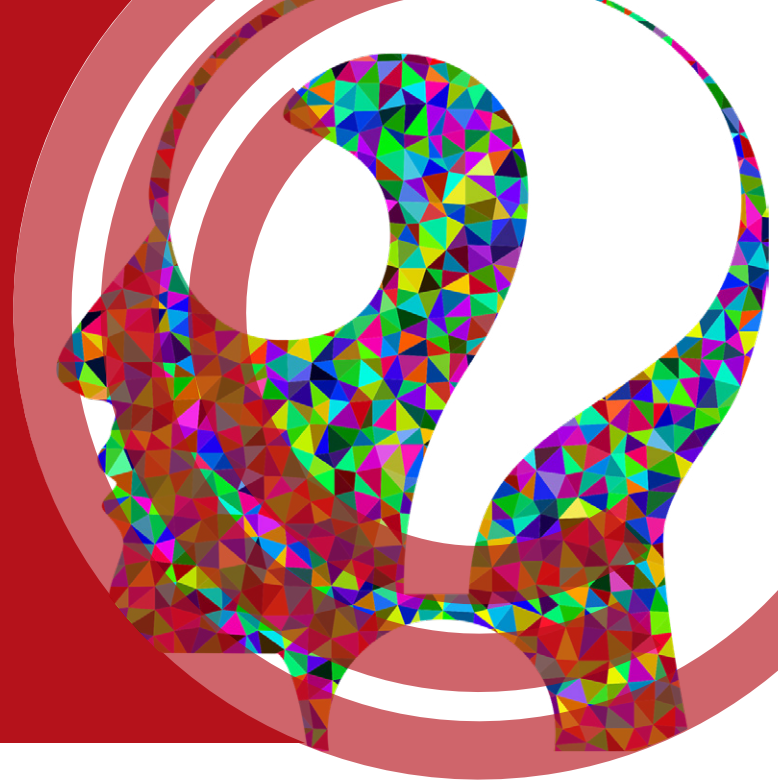




INTERVIEW TACTICS: THE UNEXPECTED QUESTIONS TECHNIQUE

A technique for helping to establish whether an account is true and accurate.



HOW DOES IT WORK

“ Preparing for anticipated questions makes lying easier and planned lies contain fewer cues to deceit than spontaneous lies. But this strategy is only successful if liars can anticipate what questions will be asked. ”

A consistent finding in deception research is that liars prepare themselves for anticipated interviews. They do so by preparing possible answers to questions they expect to be asked. This strategy of preparing answers for possible questions makes sense. Planning makes lying easier and planned lies typically contain fewer verbal cues to deceit than spontaneous lies.

However, preparing for questions has a limitation. It will be a successful strategy only if liars correctly anticipate which questions will be asked. Investigators can exploit this limitation by asking questions that liars do not anticipate. Though liars can refuse to answer unexpected questions by saying “I don’t know” or “I can’t remember”, such responses will create suspicion if they are about central aspects of the target event. A liar, therefore,

has little option other than to fabricate a plausible answer on the spot, which she may find difficult to do.

Expected questions should be easier for liars to answer than unexpected questions for which they haven’t prepared. The additional cognitive load that liars experience when answering unexpected questions tends to become evident in their responses: typically, liars give less detailed and/or less plausible answers to unexpected questions compared to expected questions. In contrast, truth tellers generally experience the same cognitive load when answering expected and unexpected questions, so their answers to both question types tend to be comparable.

HOW TO USE IT

The unexpected questions technique can be used with individual interviewees or with multiple interviewees.

SINGLE INTERVIEWEE

When interviewing a **single interviewee**, start by asking questions the interviewee has probably expected. This means someone who is lying can report their rehearsed answers, which they may well be willing to do. Next, ask questions that are appropriate for the context, but someone who is lying has probably not expected. Since the questions are reasonable, an interviewee cannot say 'I don't know' or 'I can't remember' and thus have to answer these questions if wishing to remain seeming cooperative.

Compare the answers to the expected and unexpected questions in terms of detail and plausibility. Because it is harder to come up with unplanned, spontaneous, deceptive answers, liars tend to provide less detailed and less plausible answers to the unexpected questions than to the the expected questions.

In contrast, someone telling the truth should be able to answer both sets of questions with similar levels of detail and plausibility.

MULTIPLE INTERVIEWEES

When interviewing multiple interviewees about the same event, separate them before the interview and interview them individually. Ask each individual the same mixture of expected and unexpected questions starting with the expected questions. Compare the answers the individuals gave and look for overlap in the answers. Individuals who show less overlap in answering the unexpected questions than in answering the expected questions may be lying.



COGNITIVE LOAD

Cognitive load refers to the mental effort needed to complete tasks. Liars need to carry out multiple tasks at once, such as trying to construct a lie which sounds plausible and does not contradict facts, displaying behaviour that comes across as believable, and monitoring whether the interviewer buys this lie at the same time. It is analogous to the way a computer struggles to play a home-video whilst running a virus scan.



WHAT ARE UNEXPECTED QUESTIONS?

The technique only works when appropriate unexpected questions are asked. Such questions:

1. Should be about core events as truth tellers may not know the answers to questions about peripheral events
2. Should lead to long answers as longer answers contain more verbal cues to deceit than shorter answers
3. Should link the interviewee to an experienced event at the particular time under investigation to counteract a liar's strategy to discuss a truly experienced event and claiming that this event took place at the time under investigation.

EXAMPLE

The interviewee claims she was in a particular restaurant with a friend when a crime was committed, and therefore could not have committed the crime.

BAD UNEXPECTED QUESTION

"Tell me where the TV screens are located in that restaurant?"

This question may well be unexpected but is the wrong question to ask because:

1. It is a peripheral detail and truth tellers may not know the answer either
2. It will lead to a relatively short answer, 'e.g., I saw a TV above the bar'
3. If someone gives the correct answer it does not demonstrate that she was in the restaurant at the time she claimed to be. It just demonstrates that she knows the restaurant.

GOOD UNEXPECTED QUESTIONS

"Where did you and your friend sit? What could you see from that position? Describe your closest diners including their table arrangement?"

These are good questions because:

1. They are about core events and truth tellers should know the answers
2. They should lead to lengthy answers
3. They link the interviewee with the specific time when she claimed to have visited the restaurant.

BEAR IN MIND

Research to date has revealed two sets of unexpected questions that elicit differences between truth tellers and liars.

SPATIAL QUESTIONS

Liars typically do not prepare for spatial questions, thus a question such as 'Where did you and your friend sit in the restaurant?' could reveal contradictions in liars' answers when they are interviewed individually.

The following, allegedly true, anecdote gives another example of the efficiency of asking spatial questions:

“

Four students overslept and were late for their exam. They phoned the university, said that their car had a flat tyre, and asked permission to come to the exam a bit later. To their delight, the Professor said that this was fine. The students made their hands dirty (to simulate changing the tyre) and went to the university in their car. Upon arrival, the Professor told them that they could not take the exam in the big room and disrupt all the other students, but that they instead had to take the exam in four separate cubicles. When the four students sat in the four cubicles the Professor said that for this occasion he had added a first question to the exam. The question was: 'Which of the four tyres was flat?'

”

PROCESS QUESTIONS

Liars expect questions about outcomes rather than about processes. Their answers about outcomes are more detailed than their answers about processes and, in case multiple interviewees are interviewed, process questions are more likely to elicit contradictions.

EXAMPLES

For example, someone travels to another country for business but wants to hide this by claiming that he goes on holiday. Outcomes questions are related to the purpose of the trip:

- What is your reason for visiting this country?
- Which tourist attractions are you going to visit?

Process questions are related to the planning of this trip:

- What did you do to plan this holiday?
- What made you decide to book this particular hotel?
- How do you get from here to that hotel?
- How do you get from the hotel to the tourist attractions you are going to visit?

A study showed that liars give more detail than truth tellers about the outcomes questions but less detail than truth tellers about the process questions.

For example, someone says that he went with three friends to the movies on a particular night. If the investigator doubts whether these four people ever went together to the movies, an appropriate process question would be:

- How did you decide to go to the film on this particular night?

When planning events things often do not go as smoothly as someone hopes for. Thus, it could have been difficult to find a particular evening when all four friends were available, and it could have been difficult to decide which film to watch.

As a result, truth tellers often refer to several complications when describing their planning activities, something liars (who have not planned anything) typically do not do.

“ A study showed that liars give more detail than truth tellers about the outcomes questions but less detail than truth tellers about the process questions. ”

READ MORE

Aldert Vrij, Sharon Leal, Pär Anders Granhag, Samantha Mann, Ron P. Fisher, Jackie Hillman, & Kathryn Sperry. (2009). Outsmarting the liars: The benefit of asking unanticipated questions. *Law and Human Behavior*, 33, 159-166. DOI 10.1007/s10979-008-9143-y.

Lara Warmelink, Aldert Vrij, Samantha Mann, Shyma Jundi, & Pär Anders Granhag. (2012). Have you been there before? The effect of experience and question expectedness on lying about intentions. *Acta Psychologica*, 141, 178-183. doi:10.1016/j.actpsy.2012.07.011

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