USING SELF-GENERATED CUES TO ELICIT INFORMATION

This technique uses details generated by interviewees to aid their recall of information.

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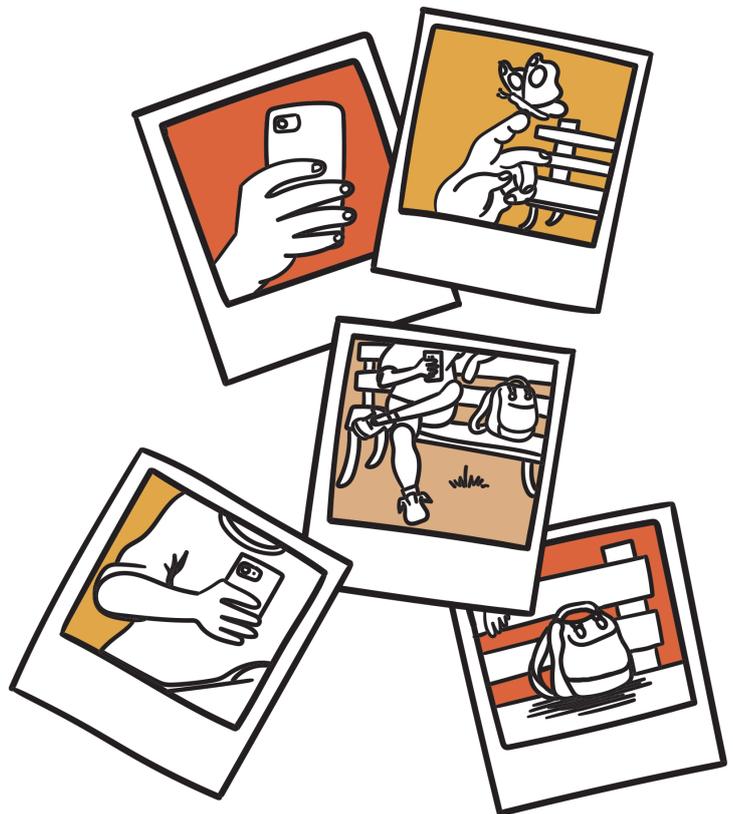
WHAT ARE SELF-GENERATED CUES?

Self-generated cues are details that are actively generated by the interviewees themselves as important or salient aspects of a target memory.

Witnessing an event is an inherently subjective experience. When an experience is shared by multiple people, it is likely that when attempting to remember what occurred, different details will stand out for each individual.

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Because of the nature of these cues, they can effectively prompt further recall of associated information.

WHY DO SELF-GENERATED CUES WORK AS AN EFFECTIVE MEMORY AID?

Because details of a witnessed event are associated in memory, retrieving one detail often leads to recall of another. The use of this aid at retrieval helps activate the links between related details in memory and, in doing so, facilitates the recall and reporting of more information. If the overlap between the retrieval cue and the original memory is optimised, this will enhance retrieval further.

When using the self-generated cues memory aid, interviewers ask interviewees to list the 'six things that come to mind' when they think about the event. These 'self-generated' cues can then also be used to prompt the recall of other closely related details using open-questioning approaches.

Compared to interviewer-generated cues (e.g., mental reinstatement of context technique), self-generated cues are intuitive to use because they match the subjective experience of the interviewee.

WHAT DOES THE RESEARCH SAY?

Although the application of self-generated cues in an information elicitation context is a relatively recent innovation, the principles underpinning them span over forty years of well-established memory theory.

Recent tests of this approach in information elicitation contexts suggest that compared to those who received standard mental reinstatement of context instructions, participants who generated their own cues reported more accurate information.

Other research has reported a beneficial effect of using self-generated cues for promoting additional recall across both timeline and free recall interview formats.

WHEN CAN SELF-GENERATED CUES BE USED?

Self-generated cues can be used at the beginning of a debrief or in an interview with a cooperative interviewee, in conjunction with the Timeline Technique, to prompt the interviewee's memory about a witnessed single event or a series of repeated events.

HOW TO USE SELF-GENERATED CUES AS A MEMORY AID

- Administer the following instruction: "*Without thinking too hard, write down the first six things that you remember seeing or thinking when witnessing the event. It doesn't matter what these things are. All that is important is that they immediately come to mind when thinking back to the event. Please list them here [on a piece of paper]. Think about each of the things in your list one at a time and think about whether that memory helps you remember other things that also happened in the event.*"

- The interviewee should flexibly list the first six things they remember from the event – they can use single words, phrases or full sentences. If the interviewee cannot recall a total of six things, they are free to list as many as possible.

- Proceed to the next stage of the interviewing process where the interviewee is encouraged to provide a free narrative of everything they remember about the event.

- Interviewees should be able to keep the list of the self-generated cues close during the interviewing process in case they want to refer back to it.

KEEP IN MIND

When reporting information about a series of repeated events (e.g., repeated meetings with a particular individual or group) that were witnessed over time, interviewees should be prompted to use this self-generated cues memory aid for each event separately, prior to providing a full report per event.

When retrieving details of repeated events, it can be challenging for interviewees to discriminate between the separate incidents, especially when they are similar.

Therefore, the use of this technique, prior to reporting each event in detail, should help interviewees to 'label' each event and discriminate what happened when, which should, in turn, facilitate the reporting of information for each event.

SUMMARY

Administration of the self-generated cues memory aid is quick and it supports an open-ended interviewing process that is led by the source rather than the interviewer. When eliciting information about repeated events adopting an interviewee-led approach can be particularly important, as confusing 'what occurred when' is more likely when remembering repeated over single events.

FURTHER READING

For further reading, see our guide on the Timeline Technique, as well as Feni Kontogianni's thesis summary on eliciting information from cooperative sources about single and repeated multi-actor events.

Eliciting Information from Cooperative Sources about Single and Repeated Multi-actor Events

The overarching aim of this programme of doctoral research was to examine the effectiveness of information elicitation techniques designed to enhance reports concerning multi-actor single and repeated events provided by cooperative sources.

https://crestresearch.ac.uk/resources/kontogianni-thesis-summary-eliciting-information

Timeline Technique

Based on research by CREST Researcher Professor Lorraine Hope we have written a guide outlining The Timeline Technique. This technique can be used by interviewers to help interviewees by giving them an intuitive way of organising their recall and reporting, which makes it easier to organise their thoughts and reduces demands on working memory. You can download this guide here:

https://crestresearch.ac.uk/resources/a-timeline-helps-interviewees-recall-and-report-events/

To see all current CREST resources on interviewing: www.crestresearch.ac.uk/tag/interviewing

READ MORE

Kontogianni, F., Hope, L., Taylor, P. J., Vrij, A., & Gabbert, F. (2018). The benefits of a self-generated cue mnemonic for timeline interviewing. *Journal of Applied Research in Memory and Cognition*. 7(3), 454-461. 10.1016/j.jarmac.2018.03.006

Wheeler, R. L., & Gabbert, F. (2017). Using self-generated cues to facilitate recall: a narrative review. *Frontiers in psychology*, 8, 1830. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2017.01830