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

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INTRODUCTION

Successful investigations in forensic and security contexts depend on eliciting reliable and detailed information from sources. However, memory for past experiences is malleable and often prone to errors of distortion, confabulation and omission. Although cooperative sources are positively oriented towards reporting what they know, the use of ineffective communication practices and failure to support the retrieval of information from memory can impede the elicitation of a detailed account.

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.

Across four experiments, we tested the use of a self-generated cue mnemonic in conjunction with the timeline technique and follow-up open-ended questions to facilitate recall and reporting of complex events.
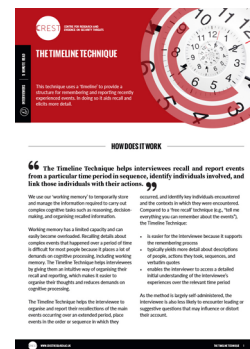
WHAT IS THE TIMELINE TECHNIQUE?

The Timeline Technique is an elicitation technique that facilitates recall for multi-actor events. It involves the use of a reporting format with a physical timeline and a set of interactive instructions. The timeline format has a horizontal line running at mid-point from one end to the other to represent the temporal context of the event.

Interviewees can report information as they remember it across the timeline by using different sets of cards to describe the people involved, the actions they remember from the event, and any statements if a conversation took place during the event. Compared to free recall, the timeline facilitates retrieval for complex events at immediate and delayed recall.

You can download the guide from the CREST website: https://crestresearch.ac.uk/resources/a-timeline-helps-interviewees-recall-and-report-events/.

EXPERIMENT ONE

In Experiment One, we introduced a new mnemonic to the timeline technique. Using a mock witness methodology, participants witnessed a simulated multi-actor assault and robbery event. To mimic what are often real world witnessing conditions, half of the participants were distracted while witnessing the event.

Ten minutes after the event, witnesses were given the self-generated cues mnemonic before providing their account or an interviewer-generated cues mnemonic (i.e., mental reinstatement of context) or no additional cues, in conjunction with the timeline technique.

The use of the self-generated cues mnemonic increased the reporting of correct information (cf. interviewer-generated and no cues) but only when participants were able to focus on the event without distraction.

Self-Generated Cues (SGC) mnemonic **Purpose**: Used to encourage the interviewee to focus on the most memorable details from the event and prompt the recall of further details. **How**: Generated by the interviewee prior to providing a full free narrative.	Interviewees are instructed to write down the first six things that they remember from the event – it doesn't matter what these things are – and to then focus on each of these things one at a time, considering for each whether that memory helps them remember other parts of the event. See the further reading section on page 4.
Mental Reinstatement of Context (MRC) mnemonic **Purpose**: Used to direct the interviewee to mentally recreate the context of the event and facilitate further recall. **How**: Through the administration of specific instructions prior to providing a full free narrative.	*"I would like to try and help you to remember as much as you can […]. Try to think back to the day of the incident… Think about what you had been doing at the time…Think about where you were, your surroundings… Was there anyone else with you… Try and get a picture of the scene in your mind. Closing your eyes or staring at a blank wall may help you to think about the event*."

EXPERIMENT TWO & THREE

In Experiments Two and Three, we examined the efficacy of open-ended questions to follow-up on details provided in an initial report.

In Experiment Two, participants witnessed a multi-actor assault and robbery event and used the timeline or a free recall format to provide an initial report.

In Experiment Three, participants used the timeline to provide their initial account of a different simulated event depicting a terrorist group planning and initiating an attack. Before being asked follow-up questions on their initial report, half of the participants were additionally instructed to avoid guessing, to feel free to withhold an answer and to consider the precision of their answers by providing broad (e.g., between 5ft9in- 6ft tall) or precise details (e.g., 5ft11in tall). This additional instruction was administered to further facilitate detailed but accurate responding.

Across both experiments, follow-up questions elicited approximately 20% new information across conditions, suggesting that the questions prompted an additional memory search. However, the accuracy of the responses to the follow-up questions was not as high as the accuracy observed in the initially reported information (60% vs 83% in Experiment Two; 75% vs 87.5% in Experiment Three), even after participants were given explicit instructions to consider the accuracy of their responses (Experiment Three).

The current findings suggest that when interviewees are asked to provide additional information, they may risk reporting details that they are less certain about and which, therefore, are less likely to be accurate. Interviewees are better able to provide accurate information when they have control over their reporting.

For instance, the use of open questions allows interviewees to choose what information to volunteer or withhold, whereas closed questions restrict reporting. Interviewees are also more likely to consider the accuracy of their reporting when they are warned to not guess and to reply "I don't know" if uncertain.

Therefore, care should be taken with the use of follow-up questions and practitioners might consider (i) recording the stage of the interview in which information was elicited, and (ii) seeking corroboration of additional details reported in follow-up questioning to confirm the reliability of this information.

EXPERIMENT FOUR

In Experiment Four, we tested the effectiveness of the self-generated cues mnemonic, the timeline technique and follow-up open-ended questions to facilitate the retrieval of repeated events (such as repeated meetings with particular individuals or groups or repeated group activities).

Reporting details of specific incidents after witnessing a series of repeated events can be more challenging than reporting details of single isolated events. Mainly because witnesses of repeated events are more likely to describe the general routine of what occurred, than report specific details, and are more likely to confuse "what occurred when".

Therefore, adopting an interviewee-led approach, such as using a self-generated cues mnemonic and a self-administered reporting format, can be particularly important when eliciting information about repeated events.

Over the course of a week, participants witnessed four simulated events of a terrorist group planning and initiating an attack. After a week, participants provided an account using the timeline bolstered by self-generated cues and follow-up questions, the timeline technique alone or a free recall format.

The results showed that use of the extended timeline technique elicited more correct information for each and all of the events (cf., timeline and free recall format).

TECHNIQUES FOR INTELLIGENCE GATHERING

This programme of doctoral research was designed with consideration of intelligence gathering contexts and the results across the empirical studies confirm that:

> " **The results showed that use of the extended timeline technique elicited more correct information for each and all of the events.** "

- The Timeline Technique, used in conjunction with self-generated cues and follow-up questions, can enhance recall for complex single and repeated events.

- The use of the Timeline Technique facilitates recall and improves the reporting of attributions of actions and statements to persons, "who did and said what and when", which may be useful when eliciting information about networks and groups of people.

- Administration of the self-generated cues mnemonic is quick and allows for an open-ended interview led by the source instead of the interviewer.

- The use of open-ended follow-up questions can elicit additional information, but such questions need to be used with caution and information obtained in this way may need additional scrutiny for accuracy.

- However, it should be remembered that open-ended questions are preferable to closed / multiple choice prompts, because they allow interviewees to have more control over their responses and choose what to report.

FURTHER READING

POSTER:
The Benefits Of A Self-Generated Cue Mnemonic For Timeline Interviewing
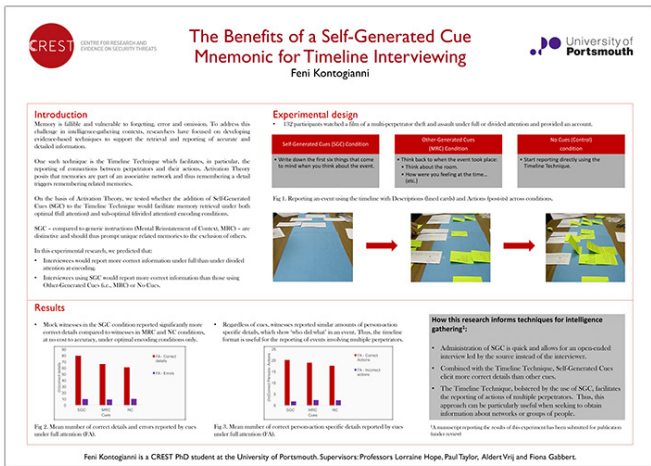
Kontogianni's poster gives an overview of her research on developing evidence-based techniques to support the retrieval and reporting of accurate and detailed information.

It was first displayed at the annual CREST conference 2017. You can download the poster as a PDF here: https://crestresearch.ac.uk/resources/feni-kontogianni-poster/

CREST GUIDE:
Self-Generated Cues Technique

This guide, by Feni Kontogianni, explains how 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.

You can download the guide from the CREST website: https://crestresearch.ac.uk/resources/a-timeline-helps-interviewees-recall-and-report-events/.

ABOUT THIS RESEARCH