

Refined interview technique can reveal plans of terror: How to get answers without asking questions

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An interview technique for eliciting intelligence without asking questions has in a series of experiments proven to work very well. The idea dates back to the renowned WWII interrogator Hanns Scharff, but has now—for the first time—been empirically validated. The technique can help intelligence agencies reveal plans of future terrorist acts. This is the conclusion drawn in a new dissertation from the University of Gothenburg.

The idea behind the interview [technique](#) was developed by Hanns Scharff—an iconic role model for interrogators worldwide. As an employee of the German Luftwaffe, Scharff became known for an interview style that was based on treating the prisoners with respect and kindness instead of pressuring them with questions and threats of violence.

Instead of an interrogation, Scharff arranged his meeting as a conversation, emphasizing that the most important details were already known, and that all he wanted was help to fill in some minor gaps. This meant that prisoners never knew when they disclosed [information](#) that Scharff did not already know, and often ended up revealing much more information than they thought they did.

In Simon Oleszkiewicz's dissertation, Scharff's interview style has been conceptualized as a complete technique that has been experimentally

evaluated. The conceptualization includes tactics with respect to storytelling and presenting claims, while avoiding asking explicit questions. The conclusion is that the technique works very well during interviews with persons who are semi-willing to share information.

Those interviewed with the Scharff technique disclosed more information than those who faced explicit questions, Oleszkiewicz says. At the same time, they themselves thought that they were not disclosing much information.

When interviewers avoid direct questions and instead emphasize what they already know, it becomes difficult for the interviewee to cooperate without contributing with new information, and difficult to assess how much one has revealed.

Previously, Scharff's success has been ascribed to his personality. However, in Oleszkiewicz's thesis Scharff's different tactics has been conceptualized into a technique that can be taught to practitioners and may help improve current practices. The technique can be useful for [intelligence agencies](#) who attempt to reveal terror plans.

Facts

The dissertation introduced a new experimental scenario where an interviewer held incomplete information about an upcoming fictional terrorist attack. The interviewer was contacted by an informant (a participant in the study) who had enough knowledge to fill some, but not all, of the interviewer's gaps. The informant had some motivation to reveal information to the interviewer, but was also motivated to withhold details. Half of the informants were interviewed with the Scharff technique and the other half by a combination of open-ended and direct [questions](#) (the so called direct approach). In total, over 380 participants were interviewed.

Two of the three studies that constitute the dissertation have been financed by the US High-Value Detainee Interrogation Group (HIG) contract J-FBI-12-187. HIG has reviewed the application and awarded the grants, but has not had any involvement in the project design or its implementation. The experimental setup has been ethically reviewed in both Washington and Gothenburg, and all findings have been published in open peer-reviewed journals.

More information: Find more information about the dissertation here: hdl.handle.net/2077/41567

Provided by University of Gothenburg

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