

Cognitive Interview

 simplypsychology.org/cognitive-interview.html

By [Saul McLeod](#), updated 2019

Findings concerning the unreliability of eye-witness accounts have led researchers to attempt to devise methods for improving retrieval. One of these methods is the cognitive interview (Fisher & Geiselman, 1992).

The Cognitive Interview is a questioning technique used by the police to enhance retrieval of information about a crime scene from the eyewitnesses and victims memory.

Because our memories are made up of a network of associations rather than discrete and unconnected events, there are a number of ways that these memories can be accessed. The cognitive interview exploits this by using multiple retrieval strategies.

| The cognitive interview involves a number of techniques/mnemonics:

Mental Reinstatement of Environmental and Personal Contexts

The interviewer tries to mentally reinstate the environmental and personal context of the crime for the witnesses, perhaps by asking them about their general activities and feelings on the day. This could include sights, sounds, feelings and emotions, the weather etc.

– In the interview, witnesses are often asked to use all of their 5 senses in their recollection of the event. This can help in recreating the event clearly in their mind and may trigger the recall of context dependent memories.

Reporting the Event from Different Perspectives

Witnesses are asked to report the incident from different perspective, describing what they think other witnesses (or even the criminals themselves) might have seen.

Describing the Event in Several Orders

Recounting the incident in a different narrative order. Geiselman and Fisher proposed that due to the recency effect, people tend to recall more recent events more clearly than others. Witnesses should be encouraged to work backwards from the end to the beginning.

In-depth Reporting

Witnesses are asked to report every detail, even if they think that detail is trivial. In this way, apparently unimportant detail might act as a trigger for key information about the event.

It is believed that the change of narrative order and change of perceptive techniques aid recall because they reduce witness' use of prior knowledge, expectations or schema.

A psychology laboratory experiment conducted by Geiselman, Fisher, MacKinnon, and

Holland (1985) compared the cognitive interview with a standard police interview and hypnosis.

Geiselman et al. (1985)

Aim: Geiselman (1985) set out to investigate the effectiveness of the cognitive interview.

Method: Participants viewed a film of a violent crime and, after 48 hours, were interviewed by a policeman using one of three methods: the cognitive interview; a standard interview used by the Los Angeles Police; or an interview using hypnosis. The number of facts accurately recalled and the number of errors made were recorded.

Results: The average number of correctly recalled facts for the cognitive interview was 41.2, for hypnosis it was 38.0 and for the standard interview it was 29.4. There was no significant difference in the number of errors in each condition.

Conclusion: The cognitive interview leads to better memory for events, with witnesses able to recall more relevant information compared with a traditional interview method.

Cognitive Interview Video

Karen Matthews (Shannon's mum) was arrested for abducting her own daughter. Although we know that Karen wasn't the witness watch this clip to see the techniques used to elicit information from Karen.

[Download this article as a PDF](#)

References

Geiselman, R. E., Fisher, R. P., MacKinnon, D. P., & Holland, H. L. (1985). Eyewitness memory enhancement in the police interview: Cognitive retrieval mnemonics versus hypnosis. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 70[2], 401-412.

Fisher, R. P., & Geiselman, R. E. (1992). *Memory enhancing techniques for investigative interviewing: The cognitive interview*. Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thomas.

How to reference this article:

McLeod, S. A. (2018, Feb 05). *Cognitive dissonance*. Retrieved from <https://www.simplypsychology.org/cognitive-interview.html>