Nonverbal Behaviour in Investigative Interviews

Ensuring accurate and effective interview practice
Wording of questions

It is well known that the way questions are worded can influence how people answer them. Leading questions can cause eyewitnesses to report a distorted version of what happened or create a false memory of events. Because of this, interviewers should be very careful how they word questions. While the effects of leading questions have been well researched, it is only recently that research has considered how interviewees can be misled nonverbally.

Hand gestures

Recent research has shown that an interviewer’s hand gestures can also influence how an eyewitness remembers a crime. In a study by Dr Daniel Gurney and colleagues, 90 participants were questioned on some video footage of a theft. If the interviewer touched his chin when asking about the thief’s appearance, participants were more likely to say he had a beard. If he touched his finger, they said he was wearing a ring. They even claimed to remember the appearance of the items even though they were not present.

The implications of nonverbal influence can be very serious. In a follow up study, participants watched footage of a man punching another in an alleyway. The interviewer either gestured a punch, a stab, or performed no gesture when asking interviewees what happened. Those who saw the stab gesture were more likely to claim they witnessed seeing a stabbing, even though no weapons were present.

Interviewee response:

A simple word can change how an interviewee answers a question. Here, people may be more likely to say the man was taller when asked the first question compared to the second.
Interviewing children

Children in particular are susceptible to misinformation in interviews due to being more compliant and feeling more pressure to conform to figures of authority. The effects of verbal misinformation have been found to reduce if the child is older, has a stronger memory of an event, or has good verbal ability. However, these factors do not appear to protect children from nonverbal misinformation. In a study led by Dr Elizabeth Kirk, children from two separate age groups (2-4 years old, and 7-9 years old) were asked about the events of a video they watched (e.g. “What was the lady wearing?”) and were given either accurate (a ‘hat’ gesture) or inaccurate information (a ‘gloves’ gesture) nonverbally during the interview. The results showed that children were susceptible to the gestured misinformation even if they were older, had higher verbal ability, and were questioned immediately after the event.

Verbal vs nonverbal

In a separate study by Dr Gurney, adult participants were given misleading information about an event either verbally (“Was the girl smoking?”) or nonverbally (“What was the girl doing?” + a ‘smoking’ gesture). There was very little difference in the amount of people misled across the two forms of misinformation. However, those misled nonverbally were far less likely to notice that they had been given misleading information.

Head nodding

Other nonverbal behaviours can influence how an individual performs in an interview. In another study by Dr Gurney and colleagues, eyewitnesses’ confidence was influenced by the head movements of an interviewer. Participants answered a series of unbiased questions on a video of a theft they had witnessed and were then asked to rate how confident they were in their answers. For half of the questions, the interviewer either gave positive nonverbal feedback (by nodding his head slightly), negative nonverbal feedback (by shaking his head slightly) or gave no feedback while the participants answered the questions. Participants were significantly more confident in their answers if the interviewer gave positive feedback and less if given negative feedback. These results show that nonverbal behaviour can not only affect the accuracy of interviewee’s testimony but also the confidence with which this is held.
Advice for more effective interview practice

It is important to be mindful that interviewees can be misled nonverbally into reporting inaccurate information, and that interviewers may be unaware they are providing such misinformation. Our nonverbal behaviour is automatic and so, rather than try to take control of it, we should instead try to ensure that it is monitored by a third party. Current PACE (Police & Criminal Evidence) guidelines require audio recording of interviews, but video recording interviews would allow an additional means of ascertaining when potential influence has occurred.

References


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For more information on this research, please visit Daniel's research profile at: go.herts.ac.uk/daniel_gurney