Chapter 5

E-Simulations for the Purpose of Training Forensic (Investigative) Interviewers

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ABSTRACT

One of the most critical issues facing investigative organisations is how best to administer effective practice opportunities in investigative interviewing on a global scale. Interviewer evaluation research across the world has highlighted inadequacies in the adherence to and maintenance of best-practice interview approaches, and insufficient opportunities for practice and feedback are the major reasons attributed by experts for poor interviewer competency. “Unreal Interviewing: Virtual Forensic Interviewing of a Child” (an e-simulation created at Deakin University, Australia) was developed as a way to ‘expand the reach’ of trainers in the investigative interviewing area. The simulation enables trainers to provide ongoing professional development for forensic interviewers in dispersed work environments, without the financial burden on organisations of extracting large numbers of professionals from the workplace to the classroom. This chapter provides readers with: an overview of the key stages involved in the development of Unreal Interviewing and the education and technical decisions that needed to be made; and a review of the application of “Unreal Interviewing” in the training and continuing professional development of trainees in their workplace.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-61350-189-4.ch005
INTRODUCTION

Whenever there is an allegation of abuse (or other crime) perpetrated against, or in the presence of, a child, the child witness will typically engage in an investigative interview with a professional working in the forensic field. Although investigative interviews may vary in purpose, scope, and content, the common objective of all investigative interviews is to elicit an accurate, complete, and detailed account of the incident in question (Powell, 2009).

Eliciting an accurate and detailed account of an event (such as abuse) from a child is a complex process that involves several skills and competencies which have been well articulated in the literature. Overall, experts agree that the most critical skill is the ability to maintain the use of non-leading, open-ended questions; such questions elicit elaborate responses but do not dictate or suggest what information is required (e.g., “I wasn’t there when that happened. Start at the beginning and tell me everything that happened”, “What else happened?”, “And then what happened?”; Powell & Snow, 2007). Open-ended questions are essential because they maximise the accuracy of the child’s account of the event and minimise the opportunity for confusion, contamination and/or misunderstandings between the child and the interviewer (Powell, Fisher, & Wright, 2005). An open-ended questioning style is also critical to tasks such as the development of rapport (Roberts, Lamb, & Sternberg, 1999; Sternberg et al., 1997) and the elicitation of a clear disclosure of abuse and temporal attributes (Orbach & Lamb, 2007; Powell & Snow, 2007). Further, open-ended questions elicit the most coherent and credible statements from child witnesses (Feltis, Powell, Snow, & Hughes-Scholes, 2010; Guadagno, Powell, & Wright, 2006).

Experts in investigative interviewing are also in agreement about what is generally needed to promote the use of open-ended questions. As with most practical skills (see Ericsson, 2004; Ericsson, Krampe, & Tesch-Romer, 1993), regular practice in the use of open-ended questions and expert feedback is critical. The impact of practice and feedback has been indicated in studies showing better use of open-ended questions among interviewers who received these elements on an ongoing basis (i.e., after the initial training program ceased) compared to those who did not (Lamb, Sternberg, Orbach, Herskowitz, et al, 2002; Powell, Fisher, & Hughes-Scholes, 2008a, 2008b). However, research in relation to interviewer training is still in its infancy and further research is needed to define the relative effectiveness of the various training elements as well as the precise way in which feedback and practice exercises should be delivered.

The importance of, and urgent need for, further guidance in this area is heightened by the finding that most investigative interviewers have tremendous difficulty maintaining open-ended questions with children. Most of the prior evaluation research in the U.K., U.S., and Australia has revealed rates of open-ended questions of approximately 25%; research has shown that this low rate would be minimising the chance of successful prosecution (Pipe, Orbach, Lamb, Abbott, & Stewart, 2008). The major reason attributed to this poor performance is insufficient opportunity (within police and human service organisations) to practise skills on an ongoing basis, and a lack of appropriate monitoring and supervision of performance (Aarons, Powell, & Browne, 2004; Davies, Wilson, Mitchell, & Milsom, 1995; Lamb, Sternberg, Orbach, Espin, & Mitchell, 2002; Lamb, Sternberg, Orbach, Herskowitz et al., 2002; Schollum, Westera, Grantham, & Chartres, 2006; Wright, Guadagno, & Powell, 2009).

Learning the precise skill of maintaining open-ended questions can be conceptualised as involving several discrete sub-skills. These include: knowing what an open-ended question is, and why it is important; recognising various types of open-ended questions; choosing the most effective open-ended question at the appropriate