**A free account or not? Its effect upon information yield in strategic interviews with suspects**

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**To appear in the *Journal of Investigative Psychology and Offender Profiling***

DOI: 10.1002/jip.1600

**Abstract**

*Asking suspects for a free account (FA) at the start of an interview is considered good practice in a growing number of police organisations, whereas in others it still is not commonplace. This study explored whether interviews with or without such an invitation yielded more information from guilty suspects.*

*Students in safety and security committed a mock crime and were then interviewed using a strategy of gradual disclosure of evidence, in the experimental condition preceded with an FA invitation (n = 20) and without such an invitation in the control condition (n = 17).*

*On average, relatively little information was collected in the FA phase and far more in the subsequent gradual disclosure phase. However, the FA condition yielded seven confessions, four of which were given already in the FA phase. The No FA condition yielded only two confessions. Other differences in yield were not found.*

*These findings indicate that an FA invitation could lead to some relevant and important information, such as a confession, being gathered already at an early stage of an interview, and that such an invitation does not hamper the gathering of further information later in the interview.*

**Keywords:** Suspect, investigative interview, interrogation, free account, gradual disclosure of evidence

1. **Introduction**

Interviewing suspects is an important tool in policing (Boyle & Vullierme, 2018; Milne & Powell, 2010). Modern guidance emphasises that such interviewing should give suspects a chance to explain their perspective on the allegation(s) and to put forward information they consider relevant (Méndez et al., 2021; Bull & Rachlew, 2020). In order to facilitate this, several modern practitioners’ guides recommend beginning the interview with an invitation to the suspect to provide a detailed free account (FA): a statement that is not interrupted or shaped by police questioning (https://www.app.college.police.uk/app-content/investigations/investigative-interviewing/#suspects-account; Boyle & Vullierme, 2018). The notion that such a start is good procedure stems mainly from robust findings with regard to interviewing cooperative witnesses (Fisher & Geiselman, 2018; Köhnken et al., 1999). Inviting them to tell their story without any interruption, in their own words and in as much detail as possible, is helpful to the police because these invitations foster memory retrieval processes and thereby generate more and more accurate details (Memon et al., 2010; Köhnken et al., 1999).

With regard to interviews with suspects, this picture is less clear. Some studies suggest that such findings could be generalised to suspect interviews (Fisher & Geiselman, 2018), and Cleary and Bull (2019) found that jail inmates strongly agreed that interrogators should give suspects the opportunity to provide a free account. Evans et al. (2013) found suspects of a mock crime revealed more critical details when being interviewed with an information-gathering approach – that started with an FA invitation – compared to an accusatory approach, and in their meta-analysis Meissner et al. (2014) found information gathering approaches, including those that started with an FA invitation, resulted in less false confessions in experimental studies, and without a reduction of true confessions. Others (Granhag & Hartwig, 2015; Hartwig et al, 2014) argue that starting with an FA invitation is beneficial for bringing to light differences between liars (compare: guilty suspects) and truth tellers (compare: innocent suspects), as liars tend to share less information when being asked for a free account (more omissions). Only when being challenged with contrasting evidence or other inconsistencies, later on in the interview, liars might be willing to share more information. However, other studies have different outcomes. Colwell et al. (2018) demonstrated that under certain conditions also innocent suspects might withhold information in the first phase of an interview, even to an extent that this jeopardised their credibility. In their study the participants in the guilty condition had to steal a wallet from an office, whereas the participants in the innocent condition were instructed to take another item out of the office (an envelope), which was considered not to be a crime, but a social transgression. When being accused of having stolen the wallet, later on in the interviews, seven of the thirty innocent participants did not mention taking away the envelope in their initial account when trying to explain their innocence. In a similar vein, Hartwig et al. (2011) found that a probing questions protocol led to a better discrimination between guilty and innocent suspects than a protocol where the probing phase was preceded by an FA invitation, or a protocol which consisted only of an FA invitation.

*The field*

From our communications with interview trainers and police interviewers we have also learned that there appears to be some hesitance in the field regarding ‘handing over control’ to the suspect at such an early stage of the interview: inviting suspects to provide an FA may, in these professionals’ opinion, result in obtaining ‘merely a shallow story’; subsequent attempts to obtain more detailed and specific information, which is often required in criminal investigations, may then result in suspects only ‘referring back’ to their initial ‘shallow’ account, instead of elaborating on it. Meissner et al. (2017) report that among practitioners in North America there is a popular belief that exerting more control facilitates the obtaining of self-incriminating information from suspects, such as confessions. Therefore, it is not surprising that alongside the guidance that recommends starting with an FA invitation, there are other approaches that do *not* mention such a start. The Reid method for example, a well-known model which is widely used in North America (see Snook et al., 2021), makes a distinction between an ‘interview’ and an ‘interrogation’ (Inbau et al., 2013), but does not incorporate an FA invitation at the start of either an interview or an interrogation.

Similar differences in approach have been noted in other countries. In Malaysia, for example, Chung et al. (2021) found that of the 44 Malaysian police interviewers surveyed, 27 percent stated that they never or only rarely attempted to engage the suspect in providing a full account. In Slovenia, the most widely used interviewing techniques are of a coercive nature (Areh, 2016), which reduces the chance of the suspect being given an FA invitation. A study of interviewing methods used in Germany describes six methods used in that country, two of which start with an FA invitation, whereas the other four do not (Clemens et al., 2020). The Dutch interviewing manual (Van Amelsvoort & Rispens, 2021) outlines four interviewing methods. The first one is: inviting the suspect to provide a free account; the second does not contain an FA invitation; and in the case of the remaining two methods, it can be inferred that these *could* be preceded by an FA invitation, but this is not made explicit (one of the latter two methods is the *Scenario’s Onderzoekende Methode[[1]](#endnote-1)*, SOM, to be discussed in more detail below). All in all, such findings indicate that starting interviews with suspects with an FA invitation is not yet commonplace in the field.

The idea that an interview with a suspect should *not* begin with an FA invitation seems to stem from the popular beliefs mentioned above: self-incriminating information from suspects, such as confessions, can more easily be obtained if the interviewer exerts more control (Meissner et al., 2017). Some field studies do indicate that this may indeed be the case (Meissner et al., 2014), but at the cost of obtaining not only true confessions, but also false confessions or confessions of poor diagnostic value (Meissner et al., 2017).

Given the mixed research findings regarding the effects of FA in interviews with suspects, it is understandable that practitioners may think that an FA invitation in an interview with a suspect is unnecessary, superfluous, or counterproductive. Furthermore, many studies on interviewing suspects have limited ecological validity (Granhag & Hartwig, 2015; Vredeveldt et al., 2014; High-Value Detainee Interrogation Group, 2016; Russano et al., 2019). Although some recent research does contain more ecologically valid elements (see for example Wachi et al., 2018, whose design incorporated a real transgression of rules and used police officers as interviewers), we are not aware of any naturalistic studies that have examined the effects of starting interviews with suspects with an FA invitation.

*Naturalistic conditions*

It is important to ensure naturalistic conditions: this approach may provide academics with new insights regarding real-life issues and foster the transfer of knowledge to the field. The more naturalistic a study is, the more likely it is that practitioners will recognise themselves in the study and the more easily they will adhere to its recommendations. In some cases, the lack of a naturalistic design has even led practitioners to reject research findings. In the court case *US v. Jacques,* for example, the United States district court of Massachusetts excluded the testimony of a law professor, one of the reasons cited being that the studies he referred to – i.e., studies that use the ‘alt-key’ paradigm of Kassin and Kiechel (1996), wherein participants are falsely accused of having touched the alt-key, which then had forced the computer to crash – lacked real-life relevance (United States district court of Massachusetts, 2011, p. 7): ‘Obviously, these ’interrogations’ were not conducted by law enforcement, were not part of a criminal investigation, did not involve actual suspects, and did not present the students with a serious penalty.’ Reid and associates follow a similar line of reasoning in their position paper (2015, p. 7): ’There are a number of reasons that laboratory studies are generally not applicable to reel life [sic] situations: the subjects (students) had low levels of motivation to be believed (in the case of innocent subjects) or to avoid detection (in the case of guilty subjects), the interviews of the subjects were not conducted by investigators trained in interviewing criminal subjects, the studies did not employ the type of structured interview process that is commonly utilized by investigators in the field’.

In the present study, therefore, we ensured several naturalistic conditions. The ‘suspects’ were not university students, but vocational training students following a course in safety and security. On passing their exams, they would automatically apply for a job with the police. Being suspected of a crime would thus in reality mean their professional future would be seriously at stake. We used this element to ask them to imagine how this would feel were the situation real; this in order to create a more meaningful interview situation.

Furthermore, the interviews were conducted by police detectives trained in investigative interviewing, took place in real interview rooms at police stations, and made use of a realistic (though scripted) crime narrative. The interviewing method used was the abovementioned SOM, which is currently taught to detectives at the Netherlands Police Academy and recommended for use in the field in this country (Van Amelsvoort & Rispens, 2021).

*SOM*

Guidelines that advocate starting the interview with a suspect with an FA invitation generally advise the interviewer to continue after the FA with probing and questioning (Boyle & Vullierme, 2018; Granhag & Hartwig, 2015). In the PEACE framework, for example, interviewers are encouraged to expand the FA by asking appropriate questions in order to obtain more fine-grained details (https://www.app.college.police.uk/app-content/investigations/investigative-interviewing). Any inconsistencies or possible false accounts may be challenged (with contrasting pieces of information), and this iterative process of probing and challenging is to be continued until the interviewer decides that all relevant topics have been dealt with.

In the present study, for this *probing phase* an interview plan was used that was formulated according to the principles of the SOM. This model was chosen because it was already familiar to the interviewing detectives. The SOM provides police interviewers with a framework for preparing an interview with a suspect and for conducting the probing and disclosure phase of such an interview.

A key element of the SOM is that there are a variety of scenarios – either of an incriminating or an exonerating nature – that could explain the potential evidence at hand (the information already known to the interviewer prior to the interview), and that none of these alternatives should be summarily ignored or dismissed; they should all be explored in the probing phase. The interviewer therefore prepares the interview by (i) identifying all the available pieces of information, (ii) formulating objectives to test the scenarios that could apply to each piece of information, (iii) formulating questions in relation to these objectives, and (iv) ordering the topics to be discussed, starting with neutral topics and building up to ones that are potentially more incriminating for the suspect (where a ‘topic’ consists of an objective, the corresponding piece(s) of information, and the corresponding questions). In the probing phase, the interviewer then discusses each topic with the suspect. Having heard the suspect’s response, the interviewer summarises this response and then moves to the next topic. By progressing in this way, the interviewer discloses the information they possess to the suspect in a structured and gradual manner (such as in Dando & Bull, 2011, Dando et al., 2015, and Sandham et al., 2020).

The SOM can be classified among what Hartwig et al. (2016) have identified as *third-school suspect interview techniques.* In this typology, first-school techniques are those that are confession-oriented and coercive; second-school techniques, on the other hand, are oriented towards information-gathering and grounded in theories of human communication and the psychology of memory, but without making much distinction between witnesses and suspects. The third school elaborates on the second school and formulates strategic interviewing techniques that are based on principles of social and cognitive psychology and are designed to induce suspects to disclose information. An English translation of the SOM interview plan used in the present study can be found in Appendix I (and see Figure 1 for a schematic overview of the interviewing procedure).

*Aim of the study*

Given the exploratory nature of the present study, and the mixed prior recommendations thus far regarding the effects of an FA invitation in suspect interviews, we did not formulate a hypothesis. The aim was to perform a descriptive, quantitative analysis of the interview yield, that is: (i) the type and amount of information collected in the FA phase (in the relevant condition), (ii) the type and amount of information collected in the probing phase, and (iii) the type and amount of information collected overall. Furthermore, we aimed to explore (iv) any other potential differences in interview behaviour of suspects when interviewed with or without an FA invitation before (further and more specific) probing takes place.

1. **Method**

*Participants*

37 post-secondary students participated as suspects. The No FA group: n = 17, mean age = 18.94 years, SD = 1.68, 11 males and 6 females. 15 participants identified themselves as having a Dutch background and 2 as having another, non-western background. The FA group: n = 20, mean age = 18.45 years, SD = 1.10, 8 males, 11 females and 1 unknown. 17 participants identified themselves as having a Dutch background and 3 as having another, however western background. The participants’ age corresponds with the peak in the age crime curve (Hirschi & Gottfredson, 1983). The participants’ educational level (level 2 or 3 of the European Qualifications Framework) roughly corresponds with that of the majority of the general population (for example: estimated IQ-scores corresponding with these levels of education are being around 100; see https://doelgroepenmodel.lecso.nl/; Wechsler, 2005). This was the reason for choosing post-secondary students rather than university students.

All students were taking a programme/course in ‘safety and security’ at training centres that have a covenant with the Netherlands Police Academy. Passing this programme/course automatically qualifies them to apply for a police job; if accepted, they receive an accelerated police training.

The interviews were conducted by 14 male and 15 female police interviewers (No FA group: mean age = 44.83 years, SD = 8.94; FA group: mean age = 42.31 years, SD = 8.36; range = 30 to 63 years). Their interviewing experience ranged from 2 to 35 years, and all of them had received, or were following, the Netherlands Police Academy’s professional interview training (PTI; see Van Beek & Hoekendijk, 2016, for further detail with regard to this training). Eight interviewers conducted two interviews, since it proved impossible to have a unique interviewer for each interview. One of them did two interviews in the No FA condition, two interviewers did two interviews in the FA condition and the other five did one interview in each condition.

Interviewees and interviewers were allowed to participate within their college time (interviewees) or working time (interviewers), but received no further incentives for participating. Ethical approval was obtained from the Ethics Committee of the University of Derby (code ETH1819-0048).

*Procedure*

In order to create a naturalistic situation, the participating students were instructed to steal their teacher’s smart phone. The teacher was their actual teacher, who acted as a confederate in the study. The students were instructed to follow a script in which they (1) passed their teacher in the corridor and complimented him on his new smart phone; (2) went to the teacher’s office later, when it was empty, and took the phone; (3) went to the computer room to Google the price of this particular phone and set up an E-bay account; (4) met up with a classmate and left school with them; and (5) dropped the phone in a dustbin in the school yard. The friend was an actual classmate of the participant, who also acted as a confederate in the study.

Shortly after this ‘crime’ the participants received a letter requesting them to come to the local police station as a crime suspect. In a period ranging from a day to a week after the alleged theft, they were then interviewed by a detective.

The interviewees were free to decide what strategy to employ during the interview. However, their choice of study (being: safety and security) allowed for instructing them to imagine how their future professional aims would be seriously jeopardised if they were really suspected of a crime, since this would mean their application to the police would very probably be rejected. This element made it easy for them to place themselves in a role where something important to them was at stake, thus creating a degree of realism within the interviews without being unethical. We instructed them to think about such potential consequences for their professional ambitions and how this would have an impact upon their behaviour and responses in the interview; this instruction was given both for preparing for the interview and for the interview itself.

Before the actual interviews took place, the interviewers received a presentation with instructions from the first or third author. They also received a printed version of these instructions and were given 30 minutes to prepare themselves for the interview, e.g., by getting familiarised with the interview plan and the information it contained with regard to the ‘case’. They were instructed to conduct the interview in a natural, fluent way and to maintain rapport by demonstrating a professional and friendly attitude. They were allowed to pose follow-up questions within a topic if further clarity was needed, as long as they focused on keeping track of the interview plan provided and would ask all relevant questions mentioned in the plan.

The interview plan was formulated by a senior interview trainer of the Netherlands Police Academy. For this task he received scripted police files, containing statements of witnesses, video surveillance footage and ICT information relating to the crime. The interview plan was written according to the principles of SOM. The full interview plan can be found in Appendix I.

The FA invitation in the plan (only for the FA condition) consisted of an open question to the suspect to (1) respond to the accusation in as much detail as possible and (2) explain their activities and whereabouts on the day of the crime, again in as much detail as possible. With regard to the probing part of the plan, the interview trainer had, based upon the information provided, identified 15 topics, and 11 pieces of information that corresponded with 11 of these topics. This meant the interviewers had to discuss 15 topics with their interviewee, and in 11 of these 15 topics they were able to challenge the interviewee if their response was inconsistent with the information known to the interviewer. In all, an interview within the No FA condition consisted of 28 steps: 15 topics, 11 potential challenges, one extra challenge with all information taken together, and one final summary. In the FA condition interviews consisted of 29 steps: the same 28 steps, preceded by one response to the FA invitation (which was numbered in the coding procedure as ‘Step 0’).

The participants, both the interviewees and the interviewers, were randomly allocated to the interview conditions ‘FA’ or ‘No FA’. They were unaware of the research question and were informed that they would be participating in a study exploring interviewing strategies. The interviewers were unaware, as in real-life, of whether the interviewees were guilty or innocent. The interviewees were asked to fill in a questionnaire after the crime task and after the interview. The interviewers were asked to fill in a post-interview questionnaire.

The dependent variables were (i) the interviewees’ responses regarding each interview topic, (ii) the number of times a piece of information had to be disclosed to them (because their initial answers were inconsistent with the information held by the interviewer), (iii) the interviewees’ responses after being challenged with a piece of information, and (iv) whether the interviewees confessed – and if so, at what point in the interview. See the section ‘coding’ below for further detail and Table 1 for an example of how the responses were coded.

*Coding*

Verhoeven and Duinhof (2017) found that real-life suspects employed ten different response strategies. Based upon their finding, seven nominal categories were created to code the interviewees’ responses, in order to measure interview yield:

1. Confession: the interviewee confesses the crime.
2. Admission: the interviewee provides information that corresponds with the ground truth with regard to a particular topic. (In Verhoeven and Duinhof’s study, where ground truth was not known, this was ‘talking about case related information’.)
3. Don’t know: the interviewee says that they do not know or cannot recall the information requested.
4. Vague response: the interviewee only provides non-specific or general information. (In Verhoeven and Duinhof this was subdivided into two separate strategies: ‘providing vague, non-specific information’ and ‘providing general information’).
5. Evasive response: the interviewee does not answer the questions, but complains about the situation, tries to negotiate, or poses counter-questions. (Three separate strategies in Verhoeven and Duinhof’s classification.)
6. Lie/Denial: the interviewee provides an answer that is contrary to ground truth. (In Verhoeven and Duinhof this strategy only comprises denial.)
7. Remain silent: the interviewee exercises their right to remain silent.

For the FA phase each piece of information given by the suspect that matched one of the objectives of the police topics was scored as an admission. If a confession was made within the FA, this was scored as a confession made at Step 0.

When an interviewee’s response was complex, the overarching category was scored. For example, a response to the question of “What coat were you wearing?” was “I don’t know, let me think about it, uhm, it was quite cold that day, oh yeah, I was wearing a blue jacket”; this was scored as ‘Admission’.

Admissions in the FA phase and admissions in response to questions in the probing phase were scored as ‘spontaneous admissions’ because these admissions were made by the interviewees without them being aware of the information already possessed by the interviewer.

If an answer in the probing phase could be challenged because it did not match with the police information, the interviewer disclosed the police information. The responses to these challenges were scored with the relevant label and the addition ‘after challenge’. The distinction between ‘spontaneous admission’ and ‘admission after challenge’ was made to distinguish whether or not the interviewer had already disclosed the relevant piece of information to the interviewee. Withholding this information and disclosing it gradually not only improves truth/lie detection and provides innocent suspects a greater chance to demonstrate their innocence (Sandham et al., 2020; Bull et al., 2019; Bull & Rachlew, 2020; Dando et al., 2015; Dando & Bull, 2011), but is also relevant for subsequent testing of the reliability of suspects’ statements.

If a participant confessed, this was scored as a confession in the relevant step of the interview.

*Interrater reliability*

Three raters scored four test interviews together in order to familiarise themselves with the coding scheme and to reach agreement. These test interviews are not included in the sample to be analysed.

They then independently scored the sample. Rater 1 scored all interviews; Raters 2 and 3 divided the sample and scored 21 and 16 interviews, respectively. Interrater reliability scores of Rater 1 versus Rater 2/3 were high for 25 of the 28 steps (with Pearson’s R and Cohen’s Kappa values over .800 and p < .001) and substantial for the following three steps: ‘knowing teacher’s room’, ‘computer room before challenging’ and ‘computer room after challenging’ (respectively: R = .697, *p* < .001 and Kappa = .654, *p* < .001; R = .733, *p* < .001 and Kappa = .741, *p* < .001; R = .846, *p* < .001 and Kappa = .644, *p* < .001). There were no steps with poor inter-rater agreement. When differences in scoring occurred, this was resolved in a discussion between the two raters who had rated that particular interview.

1. **Results**

*Preliminary analyses*

The mean duration of the interviews in the FA condition was 37 minutes and 39 seconds (Mean = 2259 seconds, SD = 1082), and in the No FA condition this was 44 minutes and 44 seconds (Mean = 2684 seconds, SD = 1029). The trend for the FA interviews being shorter in length is non-significant: t(37) = -1.219, p = .231. The FA interviews took place on average 3.00 days after the ‘crime’ was committed, and for the No FA interviews this was 3.14 days after the ‘crime’.

In both groups of interviewees, the mean scores (on 7-point Likert scales) were well above the midpoint for all topics in the questionnaires, such as ‘the instruction was clear’ and ‘I was able to identify with my role’. Only for ‘I felt tension while committing the theft’ was the score just above the midpoint. See Table 2 and 3 for further detail.

The interviewers in both conditions did not seem to differ in their appreciation of the interview and the interview plan: their mean scores (on a 7-point Likert scale) were well above the midpoint (see Table 4). There was a small but significant difference between the two groups with regard to the interviewers’ level of experience; the interviewers in the No FA condition were more experienced (see Table 4). Six interviewers stated that in real life they would have included some extra questions to collect more fine-grain details. Five interviewers indicated that in reality such an elaborate plan (as the one given to them) would not be written for a relatively minor case like the theft of a phone. Four interviewers wished for more preparation time, and five interviewers indicated that in a real-life situation they would have spent more time establishing rapport with the suspect. One interviewer in the No FA condition explained that they found it odd that the interview plan did not contain an FA invitation, and one interviewer in the FA condition noted that they did not fully implement the plan because the interviewee confessed right away.

We checked whether the interviewers did actually follow the interview plan. The inclusion criterion was that for each topic all questions were asked that were needed to be asked to be able to obtain the topic’s goal. So, in essence all questions for each topic needed to be asked; although this was not always literally as was formulated in the plan; and – depending on the interviewees’ initial answers – sometimes further follow-up questions were asked too. No interviews needed to be excluded.

*Interview yield*

* *Confessions*

The FA condition yielded seven confessions (35.00%), and the No FA condition two (11.76%). Four of the seven confessions in the FA condition were made already in the FA phase. In both conditions one confession was obtained mid-way through the probing phase. For the FA condition this was a confession at step 12 (topic at stake: what coat did the suspect wear at the day of the crime?) and for the No FA condition this was a confession at step 14 (topic at stake: did the suspect make a remark about the teacher’s new phone?). The remainder (two confessions in the FA condition and one in the No FA condition) were made at the end of the interview, at step 27, when the interviewees were challenged once again with all pieces of information taken together.

* *Admissions*

The interviewees in the FA condition admitted spontaneously to an average of 2.60 of the 15 interview topics within their FA (17.33%), with seven of them admitting no topics. Eight suspects (40%) mentioned spontaneously in their FA that they had been at the ‘crime scene’ (topic 13: teacher’s office). In the subsequent probing phase, these interviewees on average admitted spontaneously to another 11.70 topics, lied 3.35 times, and admitted to another 1.05 topics after being challenged. They thus admitted in sum to 12.75 of the 16 topics[[2]](#endnote-2). Since it was possible to challenge their lies 3.20 times, the ratio of admitting after a challenge was 0.33. The suspects in the No FA condition admitted spontaneously to on average 11.41 of the 16 topics, and lied 4.35 times. After being challenged, they admitted on average to another 1.12 topics, resulting in admitting in sum to 12.53 of the 16 topics. Since 3.12 times it was possible to challenge their lies with contrasting police information, the ratio of admitting after a challenge was 0.36. Thus, all data regarding admissions, lies, and admissions after being challenged were very similar for both groups. Behaviours other than admitting or lying (e.g., ‘don’t know’-answers or remaining silent) occurred very infrequently and are therefore not included in the comparisons.

Although confessions mostly took place at either the start or the end of the interview, adjustments after being challenged mostly appeared halfway, when moderately incriminating pieces of police information were disclosed (see Table 5). Topic 11 (setting up an E-Bay account) led, in both groups, to the most adjustments after being challenged. In the first half of the interview most admissions were made spontaneously. Near the end of the interview the pieces of police information to be disclosed were more directly and more closely related to involvement in the crime, for example having been in the teacher’s office. Once suspects started lying about such topics, few of them subsequently moved to admission.

1. **Discussion**

Seven of the twenty participants in the FA condition confessed (35%), whereas there were two confessors in the No FA condition (11.76%). Four of the confessions in the FA group took place already in the FA phase at the beginning of the interview (20%) and eight participants of this group (40%) ‘placed’ themselves ‘at the crime scene’ in their FA. In other respects, however, the presence or absence of an FA phase does not appear to have had an influence on information yield in the subsequent probing phase, nor did it have an impact on other potential differences in interview behaviour: both groups were very similar with regard to admitting, lying/denying, and amending their statements. We therefore conclude that the presence of an FA invitation does not have a negative impact on gathering relevant information. On the contrary, given that four spontaneous confessions were obtained already in the FA phase, and that eight participants already told the interviewer in the FA phase that they had been at the ‘crime scene’, there are clear indications that an FA phase at the start of the interview can provide the interviewer with important and relevant information at this early stage; this information can then be investigated further in the subsequent parts of the interview. This kind of effectiveness was also reflected in the trend that the FA interviews were on average somewhat *shorter* in length than the No FA interviews (which was due to the short duration of three of the four interviews where the interviewees confessed in their FA).

Although the amount of information provided in the FA phase was modest overall (on average 2.60 of 15 topics), the information collected with such an invitation can be considered to be the most reliable information (Fisher & Geiselman, 2018; Köhnken et al., 1999) as it is given spontaneously and early. The practitioners’ opinion that participants in the FA condition might have to adjust somewhat more in the probing phase, in order to ‘keep their story straight’, was not reflected in the interviewees’ behaviour: they adjusted their statements in the probing phase as frequently, and as relatively little, as did the No FA participants. These results are in line with the view of ‘investigative interviewing’ methods (such as the PEACE paradigm) that suspects could be given more control over the situation at the start of the interview, and that suspects themselves wish to be granted such control (Cleary & Bull, 2019). If in a subsequent probing phase the interviewer then takes over some of the control, in order to interview the suspect more strategically (Granhag & Hartwig, 2015), this does not appear to be a problem in terms of being able to collect more, and more specific information.

A potential confound could be that eight of the nine confessions were made by female interviewees, whilst there were more women in the FA condition (60.00%) than in the No FA condition (35.29%). However, knowledge is scarce regarding potential gender differences in confessing. Vanderhallen et al. (2014) argued that because of this apparent knowledge gap no conclusions can be drawn regarding such differences in confessing. Phillips and Brown (1998) found a small difference, with women confessing somewhat more (after the researchers had corrected for several factors), but Wartna et al. (1999) found no gender differences. We do not consider the small, but significant difference in the interviewers’ level of interview *experience* to be a potential confound, since both groups received the same interview *training*.

The finding that on average little information was provided by suspects in the FA phase, and that more information can be elicited in a subsequent probing phase, is in line with earlier findings of guilty interviewees being hesitant to provide information spontaneously (Hartwig et al., 2005; Hartwig et al., 2014; Tekin et al., 2015; but see Cleary & Bull, 2021, and Kebbell et al., 2006, who found that a proportion of jail/prison inmates indicated that their intent in their forthcoming interview was to admit to the crimes). This supports the idea that strategic interviewing techniques may be effective tools for gathering information from suspects in a subsequent probing phase.

The numbers of admissions after interviewees were challenged with contrasting police information were quite low in both conditions. Whereas moderately incriminating pieces of police information did lead to such amendments in interviewees’ statements, the more highly incriminating pieces led to fewer amendments. Such outcomes could partly be explained by the disclosure-utility management model (Neequaye & Luke, 2022), which predicts that suspects are continuously trying to solve a *dilemma of self-interest* when being interviewed. In an attempt to appear credible, they may (1) not bother to either disclose or withhold what they regard to be *low-stakes information*, resulting in a predicted pattern of not actively sharing this type of information, but also of not putting effort to conceal it, (2) keep *guarded information* to themselves at all times to avoid reprisals, resulting in a predicted pattern of denying such information (being un-cooperative), (3) be keen to provide *unguarded information* in order to present themselves as co-operating, resulting in a predicted pattern of sharing it spontaneously in order to appear cooperative, and (4) disclose *high-stakes information* only when the interview context favours a disclosure of information over withholding it, resulting in a predicted pattern of not sharing the information actively, until the interviewee learns what the police already know.

Neequaye and Luke (2022) refer to the studies of Luke et al. (2014), Brimbal and Luke (2019) and Srivatsav et al. (2019) for examples of such predicted patterns being found. Apparently, moderately incriminating pieces of police information (e.g., performing a ‘suspicious’ Google search) in our study were considered by several interviewees to be high-stakes information that could be admitted (admissions after challenge) as soon as they learned the interviewer was already aware of this information (in order to appear to be consistent with the police information, and thus to maintain credibility). Highly incriminating pieces of information, however, (e.g., having been in the teacher’s office – the crime scene) could be considered guarded information for many participants in both groups: even when it turned out that the interviewer had some information in this regard, interviewees were still more reluctant to admit this. However, such behaviour varied considerably across the participants in the present study, ranging from admitting right at the start to continuously denying throughout the interview. Future research on factors related to how *individual* suspects tend to solve their *dilemma of self-interest* could thus be warranted.

*Strengths and limitations*

Interviewees and interviewers did regard the current study as being realistic. However, the interviewees could be considered ‘first offenders’, not experienced suspects. Research has found that first offenders are – in combination with strong police evidence – more likely to talk to the police compared to recidivists (Deslauriers-Varin et al., 2011a; Deslauriers-Varin et al., 2011b), as are more naïve suspects compared to more experienced suspects (Granhag et al., 2009), but see Leahy-Harland and Bull (2021). The current findings might therefore to a certain extent be limited to interviews with relatively inexperienced suspects.

The right to remain silent was not exercised, with just one exception. In real life this right is exercised in 22 percent (no lawyer present) or 32 percent (lawyer present) of the interviews in the Netherlands (Klein Haarhuis, 2018). The findings of the present study may therefore provide insight into how to further enhance the likelihood of suspects (the majority of whom do not keep silent, after all) providing relevant information. As for silent suspects, and how they can be motivated to start talking, concepts such as rapport (Alison et al., 2013; Walsh & Bull, 2012) or empathy (Baker-Eck et al., 2020, 2021) may also be important.

Within psychological research, studies with greater ecological validity often involve smaller samples (Sassenberg & Ditrich, 2019). This is also the case with the present study, with limitations in terms of statistical power as a consequence. However, ecological validity is important, especially in investigative psychology, and this methodology allowed the present study – although still being a constructed experiment – to address at least several important naturalistic issues that can enhance the likelihood of research findings being accepted by relevant professionals and/or organisations.

It proved difficult to recruit a larger number of police interviewers (than the 29 who participated), since they are part of a limited population and had to voluntarily give half a day of their time. For this reason, the present data were mainly analysed descriptively. Even so, the present study does make an innovative and important contribution to the gap in knowledge about the effectiveness of techniques for interviewing suspects (Cabell et al., 2020; Moston, 2021).

*Conclusion*

This study innovatively explored the effects, in interviews with suspects, of the presence of absence of an initial invitation to the suspect to provide a free account. Although the invitation itself did not *on average* yield very much relevant information from guilty interviewees, its presence was associated with relatively more confessions from guilty interviewees. Furthermore, it did not have a negative impact on gathering relevant information in the subsequent probing phase of the interview. By making use of more naturalistic conditions, this study contributes to the practical relevance of third-school interviewing methods (Hartwig et al., 2016), which contend that more relevant information is gathered if suspects are interviewed strategically.

Overall, the present study further substantiates instructions which prescribe that investigators should start an interview by providing suspects with an invitation to give a free account, and should then continue in a strategic manner. No indications were found that could support the idea, still rather widespread in the field, that interviewers should be hesitant to provide suspects with such an invitation.

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**Table 1**

*An example of the coding procedure for one of the interview topics*

|  |
| --- |
| **Topic 8:** Coat |
| **Interview step** | **Objective** | **Questions** | **Response to questions** | **Challenge** | **Response to challenge** | **Code of response to questions** | **Code of response after challenge** |
| 12 | Did suspect wear a dark blue coat on <DAY OF CRIME>? | On <DAY OF CRIME>, what time did you wake up?What did you do next?At what time did you leave home?What clothes were you wearing?What coat did you wear?What is the colour of this coat? |  “It was a rather warm day. I didn’t wear a coat at all that day.’’ |   |   | Spontaneous lie/denial |  |
| 13. |  |   |   | The police has been looking at CCTV-footage of the school taken at <DAY OF CRIME>. On this picture (show picture to suspect), we see someone who looks like you in a blue coat. What can you tell us about this? | ,,Oh, sorry, I must have been mistaken. This is me, indeed, wearing a blue coat.’’ |  | Admission after challenge |

**Table 2**

*Results post-crime task questionnaire interviewees*

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Questions | No FA | FA | t(37) | p |
|  | n | M | SD | n | M | SD |  |  |
| *The instruction was clear* | 17 | 6.5 | 0.6 | 20 | 6.5 | 0.5 | 0.426 | .673 |
| *I performed the theft according to the instruction* | 17 | 6.5 | 0.5 | 20 | 6.8 | 0.4 | -1.400 | .170 |
| *I was able to identify with my role* | 17 | 5.5 | 1.1 | 20 | 5.7 | 1.0 | -4.930 | .625 |
| *I felt tension while committing the theft* | 17 | 3.9 | 1.7 | 20 | 4.2 | 1.7 | -0.573 | .571 |

**Table 3**

*Results post-interview questionnaire interviewees*

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Questions | No FA | FA | t(37) | p |
|  | n | M | SD | n | M | SD |  |  |
| *The instruction was clear* | 17 | 6.3 | 0.6 | 20 | 6.3 | 0.8 |  0.190 |  .850 |
| *I was able to identify with my role* | 17 | 6.1 | 1.0 | 20 | 5.8 | 1.1 |  0.772 |  .445 |
| *I had a strategy in mind* | 17 | 4.8 | 2.2 | 20 | 5.1 | 1.3 |  -0.576 |  .568 |
| *I was able to stick to my strategy* | 17 | 5.4 | 1.5 | 20 | 5.2 | 1.2 |  0.335 |  .740 |
| *I was willing to make a statement* | 17 | 5.9 | 1.5 | 20 | 6.1 | 1.4 | -0.230 |  .819 |
| *I felt rapport with the interviewer* | 17 | 5.8 | 0.7 | 20 | 5.9 | 0.9 |  -0.278 |  .782 |
| *I think the interviewer believed me* | 17 | 4.8 | 1.4 | 20 | 4.7 | 1.4 |  0.144 |  .887 |
| *I had to adjust my statement frequently* | 17 | 2.6 | 1.7 | 20 | 3.2 | 1.8 |  -1.079 |  .288 |
| *I lied … times:* |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| *0 = 0 times* | 1 |  |  | 3 |  |  |  |  |
| *1 = 1-2 times* | 3 |  |  | 4 |  |  |  |  |
| 2 = 3-4 times | 4 |  |  | 6 |  |  |  |  |
| 3 = 5 times or more | 9 |  |  | 7 |  |  |  |  |

**Table 4**

*Results post-interview questionnaire interviewers*

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Questions | No FA | FA | t(37) | p |
|  | n | M | SD | n | M | SD |  |  |
| *Interviewing experience (in years)* | 17 | 18.3 | 9.5 | 20 | 12.8 | 6.5 | 2.044 | .049\* |
| *I was able to stick to the plan* | 17 | 5.7 | 0.7 | 20 | 5.6 | 1.3 | 0.132 | .895 |
| *It was easy to stick to the plan* | 17 | 4.1 | 1.5 | 20 | 4.4 | 1.9 | -0.408 | .686 |
| *The instructions were clear* | 17 | 5.8 | 0.9 | 20 | 5.8 | 1.1 | 0.073 | .942 |
| *The interview plan was realistic* | 17 | 4.5 | 1.4 | 20 | 3.7 | 1.9 | 1.407 | .168 |
| \*p < .050 |  |

**Table 5**

*Admissions made for each topic, before and after being challenged*

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Topic | Admissions | No FA | FA | Sum |
|  |  | n | % | n | % | n | % |
| 1. Pupil
 | Spontaneous | 17 | 100 | 20 | 100 | 37 | 100 |
|  | After challenge | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
|  | Sum of admissions | 17 | 100 | 20 | 100 | 37 | 100 |
| 1. Teacher
 | Spontaneous | 17 | 100 | 20 | 100 | 37 | 100 |
|  | After challenge | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
|  | Sum of admissions | 17 | 100 | 20 | 100 | 37 | 100 |
| 1. Office
 | Spontaneous | 17 | 100 | 18 | 90 | 35 | 94.6 |
|  | After challenge | NA1 | NA | NA | NA | NA | NA |
|  | Sum of admissions | 17 | 100 | 18 | 90 | 35 | 94.6 |
| 1. Friend
 | Spontaneous | 16 | 94.1 | 20 | 100 | 36 | 97.3 |
|  | After challenge | 1 | 5.9 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 2.7 |
|  | Sum of admissions | 17 | 100 | 20 | 100 | 37 | 100 |
| 1. Friend reliable
 | Spontaneous | 17 | 100 | 20 | 100 | 37 | 100 |
|  | After challenge | NA | NA | NA | NA | NA | NA |
|  | Sum of admissions | 17 | 100 | 20 | 100 | 37 | 100 |
| 1. Account
 | Spontaneous | 17 | 100 | 20 | 100 | 37 | 100 |
|  | After challenge | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
|  | Sum of admissions | 17 | 100 | 20 | 100 | 37 | 100 |
| 1. Account private
 | Spontaneous | 16 | 94.1 | 19 | 95 | 35 | 94.6 |
|  | After challenge | NA | NA | NA | NA | NA | NA |
|  | Sum of admissions | 16 | 94.1 | 19 | 95 | 35 | 94.6 |
| 1. Coat
 | Spontaneous | 10 | 58.8 | 13 | 65 | 23 | 62.2 |
|  | After challenge | 4 | 23.5 | 2 | 10 | 6 | 16.2 |
|  | Sum of admissions | 14 | 82.4 | 15 | 75 | 29 | 78.4 |
| 1. Remark
 | Spontaneous | 14 | 82.4 | 10 | 50 | 24 | 64.9 |
|  | After challenge | 2 | 11.8 | 5 | 25 | 7 | 18.9 |
|  | Sum of admissions | 16 | 94.1 | 15 | 75 | 31 | 83.8 |
| 1. Computer
 | Spontaneous | 17 | 100 | 15 | 75 | 32 | 86.5 |
|  | After challenge | 0 | 0 | 4 | 20 | 4 | 10.8 |
|  | Sum of admissions | 17 | 100 | 19 | 95 | 36 | 97.3 |
| 1. E-Bay
 | Spontaneous | 5 | 29.4 | 7 | 35 | 12 | 32.4 |
|  | After challenge | 6 | 35.3 | 5 | 25 | 11 | 29.7 |
|  | Sum of admissions | 11 | 64.7 | 12 | 60 | 23 | 62.2 |
| 1. Leave school
 | Spontaneous | 13 | 76.5 | 12 | 60 | 25 | 67.6 |
|  | After challenge | 4 | 23.5 | 4 | 20 | 8 | 21.6 |
|  | Sum of admissions | 17 | 100 | 16 | 80 | 33 | 89.2 |
| 1. In office
 | Spontaneous | 8 | 47.1 | 14 | 70 | 22 | 59.5 |
|  | After challenge | NA | NA | NA | NA | NA | NA |
|  | Sum of admissions | 8 | 47.1 | 14 | 70 | 22 | 59.5 |
| 1. Out office
 | Spontaneous | 7 | 41.2 | 15 | 75 | 22 | 59.5 |
|  | After challenge | 2 | 11.8 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 5.4 |
|  | Sum of admissions | 9 | 52.9 | 15 | 75 | 24 | 64.5 |
| 1. Phone
 | Spontaneous | 1 | 5.9 | 5 | 25 | 6 | 16.2 |
|  | After challenge | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
|  | Sum of admissions | 1 | 5.9 | 5 | 25 | 6 | 16.2 |
| 1. All
 | Spontaneous | 1 | 5.9 | 2 | 10 | 3 | 8.1 |
|  | After challenge | NA | NA | NA | NA | NA | NA |
|  | Sum of admissions | 1 | 5.9 | 2 | 10 | 3 | 8.1 |
| 1 NA: Not applicable |

**Figure 1**

*Schematic overview of the interview procedure*



**Appendix I**

*The SOM interview plan*

[Please see separate file ‘2022 04 24 FA OR NOT JIPOP REVISED APPENDIX I.PDF’ for Appendix I]

1. ‘Scenario’s Onderzoekende Methode’ translates to Scenarios Investigating Method. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. The challenge at the end of the interview with all pieces of police information together resulted in one extra topic in the probing phase compared to the topics that could have come forward in the FA phase. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)