



# MEMORY AND CONSISTENCY IN ELICITING INFORMATION: WHEN DOES (IN)CONSISTENCY MATTER?

A guide to distinguish between different types of inconsistency to help make a good judgement about where threats to accuracy lie.



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## INTRODUCTION

Cooperative individuals may be interviewed or debriefed about their memory for different experiences on a number of occasions – perhaps in different settings and by different people using different information elicitation strategies. The consistency of information provided either within the same account or between several accounts is often used to evaluate the overall accuracy of the information or assess the credibility of the interviewee.

However, there are a number of factors that should be considered when assessing the overall consistency of a remembered account.

First, there are different types of inconsistency. Some inconsistencies are the result of naturally

occurring memory phenomena. The way people remember and recall things leads to natural (and non-deliberate) inconsistencies. Other types of inconsistency may be more problematic and may warrant further consideration.

Second, only certain types of inconsistency are associated with an increased likelihood of memory error. This means that understanding what type of inconsistency you are assessing is important for estimating accuracy.

So it's important for interviewers to distinguish between different types of inconsistency so they can make a good judgement about where threats to accuracy lie. How can they do this?

# DISTINGUISHING BETWEEN DIFFERENT TYPES OF INCONSISTENCY

Where two or more accounts have been provided by an interviewee, different types of consistency and inconsistency may be present between those accounts.

## 1. REPEATED INFORMATION

This is information that is repeated in a consistent manner between two or more accounts (e. g. same descriptive details reported in Interview 1 and Interview 2).

## 2. FORGOTTEN OR OMITTED INFORMATION

This is information that is reported in Interview 1 but is not reported in Interview 2.

Failure to report this information on a second occasion could be due to a number of reasons. First, the information may have been forgotten. Memory decays over time and although initially reporting the information increases the likelihood that it will be reported subsequently, the memory trace could also decay or become inaccessible resulting in forgetting.

Second, a change of interviewer or interview type (e.g. switching from free recall to cued questions) may also produce a change in the content of what the interviewee reports in a second interview, resulting in the omission of some information.

## 3. ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

This is new information that is reported in Interview 2 that has not been previously reported in Interview 1.

This pattern of reporting reflects a naturally occurring memory phenomenon known as reminiscence that is well-documented in the scientific literature. Although it might seem counterintuitive that more information could be reported in a second interview given that we know memories typically fade over time, there are good memorial reasons why reminiscence

occurs. Reminiscence is thought to be largely due to a change in 'retrieval cues' between interviews. The style of interview might change - a different interviewer or interview type at Interview 2 - which in turn may prompt memory for additional information that wasn't recalled in the first interview.

Reminiscence is a relatively common occurrence when an interviewee provides multiple accounts across interviews - particularly if the format of the interviews is dissimilar.

## 4. CONTRADICTORY INFORMATION

This is information that is reported in Interview 2 that contradicts information reported in Interview one (e.g. a 'red jacket' is reported in Interview 1 but is changed to a 'blue jacket' in Interview 2).



## ARE INCONSISTENCIES INACCURATE?

Research suggests that remembered information reported consistently across interviews (i.e. same details reported in Interview 1 and Interview 2) tends to be reported with fairly high accuracy. The same is true of forgotten or omitted information – the fact that it is subsequently forgotten does not reflect on the original accuracy of the information.

Reminiscent information – additional information reported in a subsequent interview – can also be highly accurate. This is important to know as interviewers have a tendency to be unaware of the phenomenon of reminiscence or are sceptical when an interviewee reports new information in a later interview. However, reminiscent information is sometimes less accurate than consistently reported or subsequently forgotten information, so caution may be necessary.

Contradictory information is more problematic, however, and research suggests that the accuracy rates for contradictory items are low.

So it is important to distinguish between different types of inconsistency and, in particular, pay attention to information that contradicts previous statements.

## IS CONSISTENCY RELATED TO OVERALL ACCURACY?

Interviewers are sometimes concerned that inconsistency (of any kind) reflects on the likely overall accuracy of the interviewee – and the overall credibility of the interviewee as a witness or informant. This is not the case. Research shows that interviewees who provide additional reminiscent details are not less accurate overall than those who do not. Similarly, research shows that interviewees who provide contradictory details are not generally less accurate overall.

So, reminiscent and contradictory details are not predictive of the overall accuracy or reliability of an interviewee's account.



### KEY POINTS

- Inconsistency in parts of a response does not necessarily mean that the interviewee is unreliable.
- If some information is not repeated in a follow-up interview, this doesn't necessarily mean it is incorrect - it may simply have been forgotten.
- New information in a subsequent interview is not necessarily false.
- In cases of contradictory information, the interviewer should explore with the interviewee why this contradiction might have occurred – there may be a plausible reason.

## HOW SHOULD INTERVIEWERS RESPOND TO INCONSISTENCY?

An interviewer can take a number of steps to respond to apparent inconsistencies in an interviewee's account across multiple interviews.

When inconsistencies emerge, consider whether

- (i) both interviews were conducted by the same or different interviewers;
- (ii) the interviews involved different questioning approaches (e.g. open-ended versus closed questions); and
- (iii) interviewees were encouraged to give information even if they weren't particularly confident about it.

It may also be relevant to consider the length of delay between the interviews as a significant delay could lead to memories fading.

It is also important to consider the nature of the inconsistency and remember that not all inconsistencies mean that the interviewee is in error. Reminiscent details are quite likely to be correct and emerge as a result of a naturally occurring memory process. On the other hand, direct contradictions are more likely to be in error.

Contradictions can occur for a number of reasons. For example, the interviewee might have encountered information since the original interview which has led them to change their mind about aspects of their initial account.

Alternatively, the original information might have been provided with a low level of certainty and has now either been forgotten or revised. Or it

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may be that the interviewee is trying to change the content of their story for reasons unrelated to their memory of the event in question (e.g. under pressure from another person, or to dig themselves out of a hole).

If contradictions emerge in the course of an interview and the interviewer knows this information to be at odds with information provided previously, then the interviewer should explore with the interviewee why this contradiction might have occurred. The interviewee may well be able to provide a plausible account for this apparent inconsistency.

### READ MORE

Fisher R. P., Brewer, N., Mitchell, G. (2009). The relation between consistency and accuracy of eyewitness testimony: Legal versus cognitive explanations. In: R. Bull, T. Valentine, T. Williamson. Handbook of psychology of investigative interviewing: Current developments and future directions. John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

Hope, L., Gabbert, F., Fisher, R. P. and Jamieson, K. (2014). Protecting and enhancing eyewitness memory: The impact of an initial recall attempt on performance in an investigative interview. *Applied Cognitive Psychology*, 28, 304–313.

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