In his book *The Black Banners*, Ali Soufan, a former FBI intelligence interviewer, describes an interesting case where he used subtle influence tactics that ultimately led an al-Qaeda operative – Anas al-Mekki – to disclose sensitive information.

Based on the available intelligence, Soufan deduced that al-Mekki valued respect highly. Thus, to facilitate the likelihood that al-Mekki would disclose information, Soufan shrewdly increased al-Mekki’s perceptions that he was respected by altering the previously bare interview room to resemble a homely living room.

In addition, Soufan allowed al-Mekki to remain uncuffed during their interview sessions and, when attempting to elicit information, Soufan drew on al-Mekki’s need for respect by being firm but friendly and respectful.

**PRIMING TO PROMOTE INFORMATION DISCLOSURE**

Social psychologists refer to such tactics, where a particular perception or motivation is covertly increased to influence a target’s behaviour, as priming.

An emerging body of psychological research suggests that priming motivations, which is likely to promote information disclosure, leads interviewees to share more information in intelligence interviews. For example, in what interviewees believed was a concentration exercise, an American group of researchers, Dawson, Hartwig and Brimbal, primed trust and feelings of security by instructing the interviewees to reflect on a personal relationship with a confidant. Some other interviewees were not primed.

Subsequently, all the interviewees, who possessed information about a mock terrorist attack, were interviewed about the attack. The results of the experiment indicated that those interviewees whose feelings of trust and security were previously primed disclosed more information than their counterparts who were not primed.

Similar to Soufan’s example, another experiment in the same laboratory demonstrated that the contextual features of an interview room, like its size and interior design, could be used to prime interviewees’ tendencies to be either open and forthcoming with information, or closed and hold back information.

These researchers found that interviewees who were interviewed in a spacious room with open windows were more forthcoming with information compared to those interviewed in an enclosed windowless room.

These research findings are promising because they offer intelligence interviewers the possibility of greater information gain through using various priming tactics to strategically activate interviewees’ motivations to share information. However, as with many fledgling scientific studies, the underlying mechanisms that give rise to the influence of priming tactics on information disclosure remain unknown.

Identifying the specific processes and conditions that lead primed interviewees to share information is particularly important, because such knowledge affords interviewers the opportunity to implement priming tactics efficiently and accurately.

**PRIMING HELPFULNESS**

Previous research has demonstrated that activating individuals’ helpfulness motivations increases their cooperativeness in various domains. Such increased interviewee cooperation fits neatly with the interviewee’s task of soliciting information, since a cooperative interviewer is likely to share reliable information.

In my research, participants assumed the role of an informant with information about an impending terrorist attack. Before they were interviewed, in what they believed was an unrelated task, half of the participants were primed with helpfulness motivations using a guided imagination and writing reflection exercise, half of the participants were not primed.

Following the interview style that sought to draw on helpfulness motivations, in contrast to direct questions, was less successful among those participants least predisposed to be helpful.

These findings provide some important information that could be useful to interviewers who intend to add subtle influence tactics such as priming to their interviewing toolkit. First, it is crucial to tailor the priming tactic, such as modifying the interior features of the interview room, to fit some specific disclosure-related characteristic of the interviewee, like the need to feel relevant, in order to effectively predispose them toward disclosing information.

Second, when interacting with the interviewee to elicit information, use an interview style that embodies an interpersonal approach that draws on the primed motivation, as this is most likely to maximise the primed interviewee’s disclosure.