CENTRE FOR RESEARCH AND EVIDENCE ON SECURITY THREATS

Safe Space: Does Context Affect Self-Disclosure in Security Vetting?

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Introduction

Security vetting involves validating a person's identity, and assessing their integrity and suitability for security sensitive employment.

Most research on self-disclosure has focused on individual differences, such as the gender and personality of the discloser.

Research on contextual self-disclosure has examined online settings, interviewer-interviewee distance, and room space.

However, findings from these studies are limited because they are mainly concerned with spatial manipulation, and the disclosure of information concerning interpersonal relationships or disclosure during investigative interviews.

This study sought to explore whether various contexts had an effect on self-disclosure as it relates to security vetting.

Simulating a vetting interview

Pilot work developed the Sensitive Topic Questionnaire (STQ). Interviewees were asked 37 yes/no questions in an audio recorded interview, and then prompted for additional information for each affirmative response.

The STQ asks about:

- Affiliations (suspicious connections, questionable loyalties; e.g., **'Have any of your family members spent time in prison?'**)
- Character (frowned upon behaviour, calculated deceit, cynical orientation; e.g., **'Have you ever said something racist?'**)
- Criminal transgressions (criminality, disrespect of the law, rules, establishments, or rights of others; e.g., **'Have you ever shoplifted?'**)
- Ego (protection of feelings of self-worth or self-definition; e.g., **'Have you ever had a mental health evaluation?'**)
- Irresponsible behaviour (impulsivity; disregard of obligations or wellbeing; e.g., **'Have you ever been fired from a job?'**)
- Sensation seeking (substance use; e.g., **'Have you used marijuana in the last 3 years?'**)

Testing across contexts

128 Lancaster University students (68% women) were recruited via flyers and the University's research participation portal. The sample largely comprised British, Chinese, and Nigerian participants.

Participants were randomly assigned to interview in 1 of 4 conditions:

1. Public (coffee shop); 2. Office; 3. Participant Home; 4. Online (Skype).

Alongside the STQ, participants also completed a personality measure, the Ten Item Personality Inventory (TIPI).

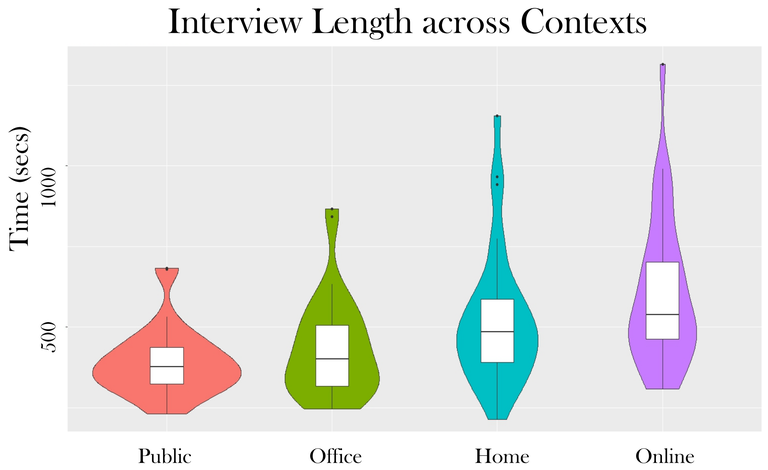
Results

Preliminary analysis examined the length of interview as a proxy for information provision.

Interviews that took place online yielded the longest interviews, followed by home, office, and public. On average, online interviews lasted about 34% longer than interviews in the public setting.

No gender or ethnic differences were found for interview length across contexts.

Self-reported personality was largely uncorrelated with interview length, however agreeableness was found to be negatively correlated with interview length.



Discussion

These findings contrast those of an earlier study that found interviewing medium (online vs. in-person office setting) does not have an effect on amount of disclosure. However, that study was only focused on disclosure of transgressions.

These are preliminary findings that should be interpreted with caution. Transcriptions are currently in progress for a more detailed analysis.

Implications

This study offers insight to the potential usefulness of conducting vetting interviews via web conference. Aside from reducing the costs involved with face-to-face interviews, online interviewing may increase information yield in potential candidates for security sensitive jobs.

The next steps will involve analysing the content of the interviews and determining why each context is more or less effective. Further investigation seeks to discover whether and why different contexts increase information related to specific topic areas.

An important limitation to this study is the fact that those who agreed to interview in their homes may have self-selected, however content of the interview was the most commonly cited reason for lack of participation across contexts.

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