

The Witness-Aimed First Account (WAFA): A new technique for interviewing autistic witnesses and victims

Background

Autistic people may be more likely to be interviewed by police as a victim/witness, yet they experience social communication difficulties alongside specific memory difficulties that can impact their ability to recall information from memory. Police interviewing techniques (such as the Cognitive Interview) do not take account of these differences, and so are often ineffective. However, currently there exists no alternative theoretically-driven, legally-appropriate interview framework to elicit more complete and accurate information about what autistic witnesses and victims have experienced.

We developed a new technique for interviewing autistic witnesses, referred to a Witness-Aimed First Account (WAFA), which was designed to better support differences in the way that autistic witnesses process information in memory. The WAFA technique encourages witnesses to first segment the witnessed event into discrete, parameter-bound event topics, which are then displayed on post-it notes, before the witness goes onto freely recall as much information as they can from within each parameter-bound topic in turn. Since witnessed events are rarely cohesive stories with a logical chain of events, we also explored autistic and non-autistic witnesses' recall when the events were witnessed in a random (nonsensical) order.

The study

Thirty-three autistic and 30 non-autistic (or 'typically developing') participants were interviewed about their memory for two videos depicting criminal events. One depicted a handbag theft from a passenger in a car, the other a fight between two males in a bar (Figure 2). Clip segments of one video were 'scrambled', disrupting the event's narrative structure; the other video was watched intact.

Figure 2. Stills from the theft and bar fight videos

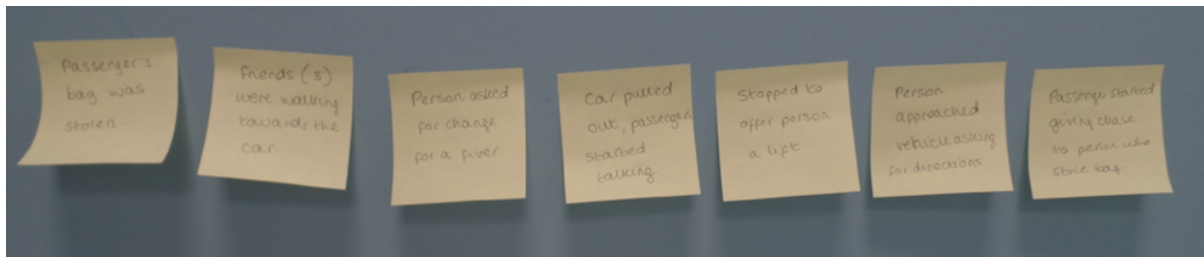


Participants were interviewed with either a control (standard police) interview or WAFA interview by one of three interviewers who were trained in accordance with the UK investigative interview model ([PEACE](#)) and [Achieving Best Evidence guidance](#) (Home Office, 2011).

Control interviews asked participants to engage in an exhaustive and uninterrupted free recall attempt of the entire video. After the witness had indicated that they had come to the end of their free recall attempt they were then asked follow-up witness-compatible tell/explain/describe questions that probed the witness' initial account in more detail. If the witness did not refer to an event or action they were not questioned about it; however, if they recalled that 'a guy was knocked out' they would be probed for further details of this (how, who, where, when, etc.) adopting the same language that was used by the witness (e.g., 'describe the guy who got knocked out').

WAFA interviews asked witnesses to self-segment their memory recall of the video from the beginning. This was achieved through asking the witness: 'In just a couple of sentences or a few words, what was the most important event that happened in the video'. The interviewer noted down the event on a post-it note, which was then displayed on the wall adjacent to the desk and visible to both interviewer and witness. They were then thanked and informed that the interviewer would return to that event in a short while. They were then asked, 'tell me something else that happened', which was again noted and displayed on a post-it note. This continued until the participant indicated that they had completed segmenting the events (see Figure 1 for an example). Once complete, the interviewer then revisited each of these witness-generated topics in turn, and in the order that the witness recalled them, asking the witness to provide a free recall account within that topic. This was then followed by tell/explain/describe questions probing further detail about each event with the same witness compatible-questioning used in the control interviews.

Figure 2. Example of self-segmentation of recall by a participant in the WAFA interview condition.



The results

WAFA interviews resulted in more detailed and accurate recall from both autistic and non-autistic witnesses, for both scrambled and unscrambled videos, compared to the standard control interview. Indeed, both autistic and non-autistic witnesses recalled around 15% more correct information and with a further 6% increase in their overall accuracy. Post-interview feedback from witnesses interviewed with the WAFA technique indicated that WAFA had helped them to think harder and remember more, and that they had felt more comfortable.

Practical implications

These findings indicate that the WAFA technique, whereby the witness self-segments events first before re-visiting each of the topics in detail in the order they were recalled (with a visual reminder such as post-it notes displayed throughout) is a useful method to elicit more detailed and accurate account of witnessed events – for both autistic and non-autistic witnesses. This technique may also be useful outside of the Criminal Justice System, from clinical practice to employment interviews.

For more information please see the full paper:

<https://researchportal.bath.ac.uk/en/publications/the-witness-aimed-first-account-wafa-a-new-technique-for-intervie>

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