# Conventional police interview techniques are not effective for people with autism

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New ESRC research completed by researchers in our Department of Psychology has highlighted that conventional police interview techniques are not effective for people with autism.

Police find interviewing and interacting with witnesses and suspects with autism a real challenge, a new study from researchers in our Department of Psychology has revealed – highlighting that the ways officers have been taught to interview could be at odds with what is needed in these situations.

As part of the study, the researchers found that existing interview techniques tend to focus on open questions, only later narrowing down to closed questions, whereas research shows that people with autism may need focused questions from the outset.

The Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC)-funded research studied what does, and does not, work when police interview people with

autism. The researchers, including Dr Katie Maras from our Department of Psychology and her colleague, Dr Laura Crane, at City University London, are calling for better training of police and criminal justice professionals as, at present in the UK, these groups currently have no standard compulsory training about autism.

Dr Maras said: "As part of this study we have heard of many cases where problems have arisen because police and other [criminal justice](link) professionals know very little about autism.

"Research in this area is still in its infancy, but it's steadily accumulating. There's a crucial need to get findings to practitioners to help them obtain the best evidence possible from people with autism."

More than 400 UK frontline and investigative [police officers](link) holding a variety of ranks provided information for the study. They spoke of the difficulties and challenges they encounter when obtaining written, oral and identification evidence. Officers reported, for example, finding it hard to build rapport with people with autism, which usually plays an important part in interviews. They also described difficulties in arranging a suitable environment for interviews.

"Police stations tend to be noisy with bright or flickering lighting and strange smells. But people with autism are often sensitive to sensory input and as a result they can struggle to maintain concentration in interviews", Dr Maras added.

Over 600,000 people in the UK have autism, many of whom will come into contact with the police at some point in their lives. Poor social-communication skills can make them vulnerable when involved with the Criminal Justice System as a victim, witness or suspect. Individuals with autism process memories in a different way from other people, which can lead to misunderstandings.

During the study, officers answered questions about existing interview practices that they considered worked well, and were asked what could be done to develop understanding and skills. The researchers found examples of excellent practice, especially among police officers who were able to draw on their personal experience of the disorder through familiarity with a family member or colleague with autism.

On a further positive note, related research shows that there are simple and effective strategies that can enhance the evidence that people with autism give and improve their credibility as witnesses. For example, providing information about a witness' diagnosis can improve his or her perceived credibility; unusual and stereotyped behaviours can be attributed to autism – rather than a lack of credibility.

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