From My Perspective . . .

Debunking Myths and Teaching Effective Interviewing

Brent Snook, PhD

I am Professor of Psychology at Memorial University of Newfoundland in Canada. I received my PhD in experimental psychology from the University of Liverpool in the United Kingdom in 2003. In general, my research involves an examination of the assumptions about human behavior and cognitive capacities that exist within the criminal justice system. The main goal of my research is to advance both legal and scientific literacy within the criminal justice system.

I am often asked how I became interested in a career in forensic psychology. The answer is quite simple. I took an undergraduate sociology/anthropology course called War and Aggression, taught by Dr. Elliot Leyton—the author of several notable books on human violence (e.g., *Hunting Humans,* *Sole Survivor,* and *Men of Blood*). Dr. Leyton was a very enthusiastic and riveting professor who sparked my interest in the psychology of criminal behaviour. More specifically, Dr. Leyton told his students about a novel graduate program called Investigative Psychology at the University of Liverpool. He informed us that a psychology professor named David Canter was using psychological findings to assist police officers with their criminal investigations. I found this fascinating, and on learning of my interest, Dr. Leyton assured me that if I earned a good grade in his course, he would be happy to write a letter of support to attend this program. I got the grade and he wrote the letter.

As a new graduate with student loans, however, funding an expensive international program was a formidable problem. To offset the cost of the international tuition, I first took a job teaching English in South Korea. I lived in Ulsan, South Korea, for a year and saved 50% of my salary—I no longer endorse this as a savings or diet plan! I returned to Canada to work for an additional year and prepare my application for graduate school. I reasoned that I should also get some volunteer experience with a police organization to improve my application. Inspector Connie Snow of the Royal Newfoundland Constabulary (RNC) decided to give a naïve kid from a small fishing village on the south coast of Newfoundland some experience working in community policing.

After a short time into my volunteer experiences, I made the incredibly fortuitous discovery that a graduate of the Investigative Psychology program worked upstairs. My introduction to Sergeant (now Superintendent) John House turned into a friendship that still exists today. Supt. House shared his professional and academic experiences with me (e.g., how he used Dr. Canter’s services on a major investigation a few years prior) and gave me insights into how psychological science could aid criminal investigations. For instance, Supt. House explained how he developed and used a criminal suspect prioritization system, which combined the empirical findings on career criminals and offender spatial decisions, to help focus the search for violent offenders who were at large.

In 1998, with the endorsement of Dr. Leyton and Supt. House, I moved to Liverpool, England, to complete the 1-year Master of Science program in Investigative Psychology. My research involved an examination of the effectiveness of a range of geographic profiling algorithms. I chose to pursue the experimental psychology program because I enjoyed the scientific process and reasoned that such a program would allow me to make the largest contributions to understanding how the (legal) world works. All along the PhD journey, I made many wonderful friends and colleagues who have played an instrumental role in my academic development, including Craig Bennell (Carleton University) and Paul Taylor (Lancaster University).

After completing my PhD, I took a sabbatical replacement position at the University of New Brunswick in 2003, where I had the pleasure of meeting Dr. Paul Gendreau, the prominent correctional psychologist. Dr. Gendreau helped to educate me about psychological science in North America and continues to inspire me to take an unapologetic stance when examining consequential topics in my field. Dr. Gendreau encouraged my skeptic side. Being a skeptic is a scientific way of thinking about the world where compelling data are required before claims and beliefs are embraced.

In 2004, I was offered a tenure track position at Memorial University of Newfoundland and given the support to pursue my research goals. Some of my research has involved an examination of the reliability and validity of some very cherished psychologically based investigative practices. For example, I have debunked the legitimacy of criminal profiling and violent crime databases. I have tackled the issue of how best to maximize the success of Canada’s DNA databank and have suggested effective alternatives to expensive geographic profiling tools. Many students ask how I chose to examine those topics. The answer is that some of my research comes from a natural curiosity about whether a claim or belief is supported by evidence. Other research ideas are purely a response to current issues facing police officers—one of the best ways to generate ideas is to talk with the people who are affected directly by the research.

My current line of research is about investigative interviewing practices. Specifically, I am testing the validity of the various components comprising the PEACE model of interviewing, which is an ethical approach to information gathering. The model was derived from scientifically accepted principles of cognitive psychology, social psychology, human communication, clinical psychology, and systematic field studies of police interrogation. I am also interested in examining issues surrounding the comprehension of legal rights by adults and youths.

Since 2008, I have spearheaded a major project to reform the way Canadian police officers interview victims, witnesses, and suspects. Through an academic–practitioner partnership, I implemented an intensive interviewing training program for the RNC, using PEACE model principles. The training is based on research on memory, human communication, and interpersonal influence and how knowledge about these areas can be used to improve how police officers interview victims, witnesses, and suspects. I (along with the help of my students and colleagues at the RNC) have trained over 300 members of the RNC. In particular, the training programs have involved the implementation of 3-day courses for all frontline officers, 2-week courses for criminal investigators, and advanced courses for a select group of specialized interviewers. I have also provided scientifically based interviewing guidance to members of many other police organizations (e.g., Peel Regional Police, Halton Regional Police, Canadian Police College, Greater Sudbury Police, Vancouver Police Department). Although I enjoy my research, I take great pride in coaching officers to apply scientific research and become professional interviewers.

Now that you know a bit about my research and training, you may be wondering what a typical day looks like for me. My day begins with my graduate students getting me coffee! On a serious note, one of the things that I love about my career is that there is no set routine—every day presents new challenges. Broadly, some of the professional tasks that fill the days involve preparing lectures, grading exams and papers, reviewing manuscripts for journals, supervising and mentoring students, serving on numerous committees, attending conferences around the world, training police officers, preparing and reviewing funding applications, designing experiments, consulting with lawyers and judges, and writing papers. My favorite thing, though, is watching my students become independent scholars and thinkers.

Dr. Snook is an avid sports fan and cheers for all sports teams in the city of Detroit (even the Lions)—he still hopes he will meet his childhood hockey hero Steve Yzerman. In his spare time, Dr. Snook enjoys playing basketball and golf and spending as much time as possible with his wife Brenda and their beautiful twin daughters, Mila and Freya.