

2-12-1999

The Psychological Ground Rules for Counter-Interrogation

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Recommended Citation

Editor, IBPP (1999) "The Psychological Ground Rules for Counter-Interrogation," *International Bulletin of Political Psychology*. Vol. 6 : Iss. 6 , Article 4.

Available at: <https://commons.erau.edu/ibpp/vol6/iss6/4>

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Title: The Psychological Ground Rules for Counter-Interrogation

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Volume: 6

Issue: 6

Date: 1999-02-12

Keywords: Counter-Interrogation, Interrogation

Abstract. This article describes and critiques the common approaches to counter-interrogation.

The most common approaches for counter-interrogation comprises admonitions and training to (1) say nothing, (2) relate "bare-bones" identifying information, (3) stick to a "cover" story, and (4) talk as much as possible about as much as possible save for what must not be talked about--i.e., the "family jewels."

To say nothing. This approach seems to totally deprive an adversary of information. However, this conclusion assumes that there is no information in saying nothing. This conclusion also discounts information that can be garnered from nonverbal behavior including that which is not under the conscious control of an interrogatee. Moreover, saying nothing may not be a viable option depending on the ongoing synchronicities and unsynchronicities of interrogation techniques, interrogatee psychological status, and situational contexts. This last statement implies that either the interrogatee may not have the will and/or ability to maintain verbal silence or the authority represented by the interrogatee may not tolerate saying nothing for long--even at pain of the interrogatee's life as an (often) needless and/or unnecessary sacrifice.

To relate "bare-bones" identifying information. From the psychological perspective of the interrogatee, this approach is virtually congruent to saying nothing. However, the repeated emitting of the very small amount of information that the interrogatee may impart may serve as a "safety valve" that somewhat expands the psychological space within which the interrogatee may operate. Moreover, complying with one's code (instructions and training about acceptable behavior during interrogation) through positive action--i.e., the emitting of information--may be somewhat easier to maintain than complying through the lack of action--i.e., saying nothing. Otherwise, the "bare-bones" approach risks the same problems of interrogatee will and/or ability and authority tolerance described above.

To stick to a "cover" story. This approach widens the psychological space of the interrogatee even further and, perhaps, reinforces proclivities to comply with one's code through positive action. However, a "cover" story provides more of a target for the interrogation authority to work on--both to disestablish the story and, more importantly, to infer that which the interrogatee is trying to protect (the "family jewels.")

To talk as much as possible save for the "family jewels." This approach very greatly expands the psychological space of the interrogatee. In fact, here the interrogatee can even pick and choose combinations of saying nothing, "bare-bones" identification, and one or more "cover" stories. Depending on empathic and cognitive sophistication, the interrogatee may also introduce a fair amount of contradiction or ambiguity as would befit many stories as recounted by individuals in a non-interrogation situation.

The crucial vulnerability of talking as much as possible depends on the value and amount of "family jewels." The value and amount as perceived by the interrogation authority can drive the intensity,

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sophistication, and duration of the interrogation. The value and amount as perceived by the interrogatee can affect will and/or ability.

One extraneous factor that is often misperceived as a "family jewel" by the interrogatee and the interrogatee's trainers is the proscription to speak or act in a manner desired by interrogator authorities for recording and transmission via communications media. This proscription to resist becoming part of an alleged propaganda victory--as long as the speaking and acting do not constitute divulging the "family jewels"--needlessly creates pressures for the interrogatee. Instead, counter-interrogation training should stress that such victories can be awarded an adversary. In fact, this policy should be widely disseminated to become global knowledge through communications media--a phenomenon that should go a long ways towards preventing any such victories.

As Lao Tzu among others has so aptly put it, he who attacks must conquer. He who defends must merely survive. The psychological ground rules for counter-interrogation facilitates survival not any cost but with significant cost to the interrogator. (See China: Dalai Lama message with a twist. (February 9, 1999). *The New York Times*, p. A8; Kassin, S.M. (1997). The psychology of confession evidence. *American Psychologist*, 52, 221-233; Leo, R.A. (1996). Miranda's revenge: Police interrogation as a confidence game. *Law and Society Review*, 30, 259-288; Ray, R.B. (1997). Interrogations. *Psychoanalytic Review*, 84, 667-680; Sear, L., & Stephenson, G.M. (1997). Interviewing skills and individual characteristics of police interrogators. *Issues in Criminological and Legal Psychology*, 29, 27-34.) (Keywords: Counter-Interrogation, Interrogation.)