Interrogative suggestibility: The role of interviewer behaviour

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Purpose. Interrogative suggestibility may vary as a function of interviewer behaviour. The present study assessed the effect of two interviewer styles on measures of interrogative suggestibility obtained using the first of the Gudjonsson Suggestibility Scales (GSS1). It was hypothesized that a generally abrupt demeanour adopted by the interviewer would produce greater psychological distance, and therefore higher GSS1 scores, than a friendly demeanour.

Methods. The study had a single factor between participants design. Participants were tested on the GSS1 by an interviewer whose behaviour was either 'friendly' or 'abrupt'. One female experimenter conducted all of the interviews. Fifty-five participants took part in the study. Most participants were first year undergraduate psychology students. Others were university administrative staff.

Results. Two of the GSS1 measures appeared to be biased significantly by interviewer style. Participants tested in the 'abrupt' condition gained higher scores for Shift and Total Suggestibility than those in the 'friendly' condition.

Conclusions. These results are consistent with the view that the GSS1 provides measures of two different types of suggestibility. However, this finding may also mean that whilst initial responses to leading questions are mediated by more stable cognitive factors that are relatively unaffected by interviewer demeanour, post-feedback scores may be more sensitive to the social aspects of suggestibility. Implications of the results for the objectivity and administration of the Gudjonsson Suggestibility Scales are discussed.

Much research on the reliability of eyewitnesses has focused on influences present during questioning which may distort testimony (cf. Loftus, 1979). Gudjonsson has termed susceptibility to such influences 'interrogative suggestibility' (e.g. Gudjonsson, 1984a). Gudjonsson and Clark (1986) presented a model which attempted to identify these influences and the interactions between them. According to Gudjonsson and Clark, interrogative suggestibility depends on the coping strategies witnesses use during an interrogation. All witnesses, victims and suspects enter an interrogation with a general cognitive set regarding the situation. This cognitive set is influenced by uncertainty about the subject-matter of the

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interrogation, the degree of interpersonal trust witnesses feel towards the interrogator, and their expectations regarding what is about to happen. This general cognitive set can facilitate either a resistant or suggestible behavioural response to the interrogation.

Also important is any form of negative feedback communicated to, or perceived by, the witness. Usually this will be some form of disapproval or criticism of the witness and may be overt or implicit. Gudjonsson (1984a, 1984b) argued that negative feedback can have two distinct effects. First, it can make interviewees change or shift previous responses. Secondly, it can increase an individual's susceptibility to further leading questions. Negative feedback can either be accepted or rejected. If the interviewee rejects the negative feedback then there will be no major effect on further susceptibility to suggestions. Gudjonsson and Clark (1986) argued that, occasionally, negative feedback can make resistant responders even more resistant to subsequent suggestions because it makes them even more suspicious of the interrogator and the situation than they were before. Accepting negative feedback is thought to increase uncertainty, which increases susceptibility to suggestions. Accepting negative feedback is also likely to diminish an individual's self-esteem and increase anxiety, if only temporarily, making him or her more likely to attend to external cues rather than relying on his or her own internal frame of reference (Gudjonsson, 1992), making him or her more suggestible. The model does not assume that accepting negative feedback necessarily leads to an increased suggestible cognitive set, though it commonly does. For some, negative feedback may be construed as a challenge to improve, making them more critical of the situation and so less suggestible.

Responses to the GSS procedure may be further affected by compliance. Compliance occurs, for example, when interviewees give in to what they perceive is required of them in an attempt to appease interviewers and avoid confrontation, so that they yield to suggestions and change their responses during the procedure, even if they know privately that their answers are wrong. A tendency to compliance may also forestall memory search and retrieval processes. Some compliant interviewees may not be aware of any contradiction between what they say and the truth because they attend to situational demands rather than searching memory (cf. Baxter & Boon, in press). It is at this point that compliance and suggestibility overlap (see Gudjonsson, 1992, 1997 for further analysis of the relationship between interrogative suggestibility and compliance).

Gudjonsson developed two scales designed to measure an individual's level of interrogative suggestibility, known as the Gudjonsson Suggestibility Scales 1 and 2 (GSS1 and GSS2; Gudjonsson 1984a, 1987). These scales were primarily designed to be used as clinical or forensic tools to help assess the reliability of confessions that have been retracted, or to identify particularly vulnerable individuals who may require extra care during interviewing (Gudjonsson, 1992). The scales aim to measure responses to the two principal types of suggestive influence thought to underlie interrogative suggestibility: leading questions and interrogative pressure (Gudjonsson, 1983). Both types of suggestive influence may compromise the accuracy and reliability of testimony. Each scale consists of a spoken narrative and 20 questions about the narrative. Fifteen of these questions are leading in that they suggest certain details that were not a part of the original narrative. Five are 'true' questions which do not contain misleading suggestions. The number of suggestions accepted by the interviewee provides an initial score termed 'Yield 1'. Negative feedback is then administered. This is done by telling interviewees, 'firmly', that 'You have made a number of errors. It is therefore necessary to go through the questions once again, and this time try to be more accurate'. The questions are then repeated. Three further scores are then calculated: Yield 2, Shift, and Total Suggestibility. Yield 2 is a measure of the number of responses an interviewee changes subsequent to the negative feedback and includes all 20 of the questions. Total Suggestibility is the sum of Yield 1 and Shift.

The administration of negative feedback is an important aspect of administration of the scales. It is assumed that negative feedback applies a certain level of interrogative pressure and that variations in style should be avoided. Gudjonsson (1984a) raised concern over the consistency with which negative feedback is administered. If, for example, an interviewee has made no errors it may be awkward or embarrassing for the interviewer to administer negative feedback and this may affect scoring of Shift. Haraldsson (1985) found that interviewer embarrassment when administering the negative feedback reduced Shift, although the effect was not significant. Gudjonsson and Lister (1984) noted a non-significant tendency for one of their experimenters to gain higher Shift scores than the other.

Baxter and Boon (in press) argued that one effect of being firm rather than friendly in administering negative feedback may be to maximize psychological distance, giving the interrogator a 'tactical advantage' over the interviewee (cf. Gudjonsson & Lister, 1984). Baxter and Boon argued that firm negative feedback may also have a related effect in that it precipitates compliance. They conducted a study to assess the impact of varying only the negative feedback component of the GSS2. Participants were tested under one of three conditions which varied the firmness of negative feedback. The three conditions were defined as 'friendly', 'firm' and 'stern' negative feedback demeanour. Baxter and Boon found Yield 2 and Shift scores to increase as interviewer demeanour changed from 'friendly' through to 'stern' when administering negative feedback, although Total Suggestibility scores did not differ significantly across their conditions. They argued, in support of Gudjonsson (1983), that Yield 1 is primarily related to cognitive factors of the individual, whereas Yield 2 may better represent interpersonal influences present at negative feedback. They also argued that, because Total Suggestibility is a balanced measure of pre- and post-feedback interrogative suggestibility, it may be relatively insensitive to the effects of variations in interviewer manner in delivering negative feedback.

If the manner in which negative feedback is administered is important, then there may be more general problems associated with experimenter effect in the administration of the scales. It may be that a particular style of interviewing results in higher suggestibility scores even where firmness of negative feedback is held constant. Gudjonsson and Lister (1984) examined the role of self-concept and locus of control in the extent to which individuals are susceptible to suggestion. In this study all participants were placed under the same interrogative pressure. The major finding was that perception of distance between the participant and the experimenter was highly correlated with suggestibility. Gudjonsson and Lister identified the variables of perceived lack of confidence and control in coping with the interrogation as being most clearly related to suggestibility. Feelings of anxiety and powerlessness were also identified as important variables. Psychological distance between an interviewee and the interrogator may create a certain pressure that makes the interviewee more susceptible to suggestion (cf. Gudjonsson & MacKeith, 1982; Irving, 1980).

These results suggest that certain interrogation techniques could be used to increase psychological distance in the interrogative context. By manipulating an individual's level of self-esteem and perception of power and control, such techniques could perhaps make individuals more susceptible to suggestion than they would otherwise be if such techniques were not used. Baxter and Boon (in press) manipulated interviewer demeanour only during the presentation of negative feedback. The present study tested the hypothesis that the greater the psychological distance created between the interviewer and the interviewee by a general demeanour adopted throughout the interview, the higher GSS1 scores will be. It was predicted that a generally abrupt demeanour would produce greater psychological distance, and hence higher GSS1 scores, than a friendly demeanour.

Method

Design

The study had a single factor between participants design. The independent variable was interviewer behaviour which was varied such that there were two conditions: 'Friendly' and 'Abrupt' interviewer behaviour.

Participants

Most participants were first year undergraduate psychology students. Others were university administrative staff (mean age = 25.18 years, SD = 13.57, range 17-74). In all, 29 females and 26 males took part in the study. All participants were told on recruitment that they would take part in memory research. Of the participants, 29 were assigned to the Friendly condition and 26 to the Abrupt condition. Participants were assigned to conditions at random. Numbers of females and males were approximately equal in each condition.

Procedure

The GSS1 (see Gudjonsson, 1997 for a full description of the procedure) was administered under two different conditions of interviewer behaviour. The same female experimenter conducted all interviews in both conditions.

In the Friendly condition the experimenter smiled when participants entered the test room, thanking them for taking part. The experimenter attempted to respond in a friendly manner to any conversation initiated by the participant prior to testing, and to maintain this manner in explaining the procedure to participants. The experimenter smiled frequently and always smiled back if participants

smiled. A body position of leaning back, away from the table and the participant, was adopted for the entire period of the experiment. Eye contact was maintained throughout testing, except when consulting the scoring sheet.

In the Abrupt condition no attempt was made to build rapport or be friendly when the participant entered the office. The experimenter gave minimal responses to any attempts at conversation by the participant and limited speaking to issuing instructions in an abrupt manner. The experimenter did not smile or make any facial response to anything the participant said. Instead, an expression intended to convey mild annoyance was maintained throughout the experiment. The experimenter adopted a body position of leaning forward across the table towards the participant. Again, eye contact was maintained by the experimenter throughout the period of testing, except when it was necessary to consult the scoring sheet.

Apart from interviewer manner, the only departure from standard GSS procedure was to present the narrative on audiotape in an attempt to standardize conditions at the time of encoding. Participants completed an unrelated filler task in the 50 minutes between testing of immediate and delayed recall.

On completion of GSS1 testing participants completed a questionnaire which asked for 5-point Likert scale ratings on 18 aspects of the interviewer's manner. These aspects were: nervous, severe, friendly, understanding, assertive, confident, professional, firm, respectful, positive, formal, warm, stern, organized, effective, authoritative, competent, and negative, with a high score being more nervous, etc.

Before leaving all participants were debriefed. Those participants who had been tested under the Abrupt condition were told that the experimenter's behaviour was a necessary part of the experiment.

Scoring the GSS1

Scoring of the GSS1 was done in accordance to the guidelines provided by Gudjonsson (1997).

(i) Memory recall. Both immediate and delayed recall are scored for each correct idea recalled. Ideas are scored as correct if the meaning is the same as the original item in the narrative. Each correct idea earns one point, with the maximum score being 40. The scoring of memory recall is not included in the scoring of suggestibility.

(ii) Suggestibility. The scale provides four scores:

- (1) Yield 1. Every suggestive question that is answered affirmatively, or in the case of false alternatives where one alternative is chosen, in the first period of questioning is scored as one yield point. The range of possible scores is 0 to 15.
- (2) Yield 2. This measure is scored in the same manner as Yield 1 following the administration of the negative feedback. Again, possible range of scores is 0 to 15.
- (3) Shift. Any distinct change in response to all 20 questions in the second period of testing is scored as a shift. Thus, possible shift scores range from 0 to 20.
- (4) Total Suggestibility. Total Suggestibility is the sum of Yield 1 and Shift. Therefore, the range of scores is 0 to 35.

Results

A one-way ANOVA revealed no significant differences for Yield 1 or Yield 2 between the two conditions. Significant differences for Shift (F(1,54) = 6.2, p = .016) and Total Suggestibility (F(1,54) = 4.5, p = .039) were found between the two conditions. Participants in the Abrupt condition scored significantly higher on Shift and Total Suggestibility than those in the Friendly condition. Associated descriptive statistics are shown in Table 1.

		Condition					
	Frie	Friendly		Abrupt		GSS1 norms	
	М	SD	М	SD	М	SD	
Yield 1	4.1	2.7	4.9	2.4	4.6	3.0	
Yield 2	5.4	3.2	5.9	3.1	5.6	3.8	
Shift	2.2	1.4	4.0	2.9	2.9	2.5	
Total suggestibility	6.6	3.1	8.9	4.8	7.5	4.6	

Table 1. Mean suggestibility scores × condition and GSS1 norms

Note: Norms derived from Gudjonsson (1997).

Tal	ole	2.	Mean	recall	$scores \times$	condition	and	GSS1	norms
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		Condition					
	Frier	Friendly		Abrupt		GSS1 norms	
	М	SD	М	SD	М	SD	
Immediate recall Delayed recall	23.7 21.2	5.5 5.9	24.1 21.7	5.8 6.8	21.3 19.5	7.1 7.5	

Note: Norms derived from Gudjonsson (1997).

Two one-way ANOVAs conducted on the data for Immediate and Delayed Recall \times Condition found no significant differences. Means and standard deviations for Memory Recall (Immediate and Delayed) are shown in Table 2.

A one-way ANOVA conducted on the ratings of interviewer behaviour showed significant differences between the two conditions for participants' ratings on 12 of the adjectives included on the form. The significant results were as follows: severe (F(1,54) = 21.7, p < .001); friendly (F(1,54) = 48.6, p < .001);understanding (F(1,54) = 52.7, p < .001); assertive (F(1,54) = 5.6, p = .022); firm (F(1,54) = 15.1, p < .001); assertive (F(1,54) = 15.1, p < .001); firm (F(1,p < .001; respectful (F(1,54) = 14.4, p < .001); positive (F(1,54) = 11.1, p = .002); formal (F(1,54) = 15.6, p < .001); warm (F(1,54) = 47.3, p < .001); stern (F(1,54) = 49.6, p < .001); authoritative (F(1,54) = 24.6, p < .001); and negative (F(1,54) = 6.8, p = .012). Ratings for nervous, confident, professional, organized, effective and competent did not differ between the conditions. Participants rating the behaviour of the Friendly interviewer were more likely to rate the interviewer as friendly, understanding, respectful, positive and warm. Participants rating the behaviour of the Abrupt interviewer were more likely to rate the interviewer as severe, assertive, firm, formal, stern, authoritative and negative. Associated descriptive statistics are shown in Table 3.

	Condition					
	Frie	ndly	Abrupt			
	M	SD	М	SD		
Nervous	1.3	0.6	1.4	0.7		
Severe	1.3	0.6	2.4	1.0		
Friendly	4.3	0.8	2.6	0.9		
Understanding	4.1	0.9	2.3	0.8		
Assertive	3.5	1.0	4.1	0.9		
Confident	4.2	0.8	4.1	1.1		
Professional	4.3	0.9	4.3	0.9		
Firm	3.0	1.2	4.1	0.9		
Respectful	4.3	0.7	3.4	1.1		
Positive	4.2	0.8	3.3	1.1		
Formal	3.0	1.2	4.1	1.0		
Warm	3.8	0.9	2.1	0.9		
Stern	1.4	0.8	3.3	1.1		
Organized	4.5	0.9	4.5	0.9		
Effective	4.2	0.9	4.2	1.0		
Authoritative	2.5	1.1	3.9	1.0		
Competent	4.4	0.8	4.4	0.9		
Negative	1.2	0.7	1.8	0.9		

Table 3. Interviewer behaviour ratings \times condition

In sum, the results indicate that interviewer behaviour had a significant effect on participants' scores on the GSS1. This effect operated on Shift and Total Suggestibility scores only. No effect of variations in interviewer behaviour was found on Yield 1 or Yield 2 scores.

Discussion

That the attempt to vary interviewer behaviour was successful seems broadly confirmed by the results obtained from the interviewer rating forms. In the Friendly condition the interviewer tended to be rated as friendly, understanding, respectful, positive and warm. In the Abrupt condition the interviewer tended to be rated as severe, assertive, firm, formal, stern, authoritative and negative (see Table 3). The scores for memory recall did not vary as a function of experimental condition and were closely comparable to norms for the general population (see Table 2), suggesting that each group had comparable memories for the GSS1 narrative against which to compare conflicting information contained in the questions.

Significant differences between the experimental conditions were found for Shift and Total Suggestibility scores with participants in the Abrupt condition gaining higher scores on these measures than those in the Friendly condition. The Yield 1 scores shown in Table 1 indicate that the difference in Total Suggestibility was due primarily to the difference in the Shift component on this measure between the conditions. Shift is assumed to measure the effects of interrogative pressure on an individual (Gudjonsson, 1983), pressure which is applied overtly by administering negative feedback and implicitly by requestioning in the standard GSS procedure. These procedures did not differ, however, between the conditions in the present study: negative feedback was administered 'firmly' in both conditions and all participants were questioned twice. The tendency of participants in the Abrupt condition to be more likely to change their responses at requestioning seems most likely, therefore, to be because of the generally negative manner of the interviewer in that condition.

The Yield 1 and Yield 2 scores did not differ significantly between the conditions (see Table 1), although both tended to be higher in the Abrupt condition. These scores departed only slightly from the general population norms for the scales. It does not seem, therefore, that interviewer manner as manipulated in the present study significantly affected either the capacity to detect misleading information or a tendency to comply with the demands of leading questions. One reason for this may be that an overall interviewer manner which interviewees have no reason to link to their own behaviour communicates no particular expectancy, but increases interviewee uncertainty above the levels created by negative feedback alone in the standard GSS procedure. That this additional pressure operated primarily on Shift rather than Yield 2 of the two post-feedback scores may indicate that its effect is to increase the likelihood that interviewees will examine what was 'wrong' with their previous answers in an attempt to identify what can be changed. That Yield 2 was not found to be significantly different between conditions may be because Yield 2 provides a specific measure of the effect of negative feedback and the valence of negative feedback was held constant between conditions (cf. Baxter & Boon, in press; Gudjonsson, 1983, 1992, 1997).

Shift is assumed to measure the overall effects of interrogative pressure on an individual (Gudjonsson, 1983) and primary sources of interrogative pressure in the standard GSS procedure are negative feedback and the further negative feedback implicit in requestioning. However, the present results have identified a further factor which can contribute to Shift. Interviewees can evidently be pressured to shift their responses more frequently if an interrogator has an abrupt manner than will be the case if an interrogator is friendly but nonetheless delivers 'firm' negative feedback. One reason for this, which further work might assess specifically, may be that a generally negative interviewer manner does not necessarily bias interviewees' responses by causing them to attend to external cues at the expense of internal cues, as the standard GSS negative feedback procedure is assumed to do (Gudjonsson, 1992). Interviewees may continue to attend to internal cues, but may devalue them. A further possibility is that participants may have attempted to appease the severe interviewer by simply complying with her perceived demands, knowingly shifting their initial responses while still believing them to have been correct. A limitation of the present study is that it cannot identify the relative contributions which devaluation of internal cues, compliance and other influences

may have made to the levels of interrogative suggestibility found: these and other influences may have operated in isolation or interactively to various degrees between and within interviewees throughout the procedure or at different stages of the procedure (Baxter & Boon, in press; Gudjonsson, 1992, 1997; Gudjonsson & Clark, 1986).

These findings are consistent with Gudjonsson's argument that interrogative suggestibility consists of two distinct types of suggestibility (Gudjonsson, 1984a, 1992, 1997). Yield 1 assesses the effect of leading questions or suggestive stimuli on accuracy of testimony and the present results indicate that this factor was not affected by interpersonal factors, although Shift and Total Suggestibility were found to be. This finding may mean that initial responses to leading questions are mediated by more stable cognitive factors, perhaps involving a capacity for source monitoring or discrepancy detection, that are relatively unaffected by the manner of the interrogator, whereas the post-feedback GSS measures may be more sensitive to social aspects of suggestibility.

Note that, although the Shift and Total Suggestibility differences found in the present study were statistically significant, they were relatively modest and all scores obtained in the present study fell within one standard deviation of general population norms. It should also be remembered that most participants were undergraduates and the interrogative suggestibility of a student sample may not be representative of the general population, even though, as noted above, pre-feedback and recall scores obtained in the present study were comparable to general population norms for the scale used (Gudjonsson, 1997). More vulnerable interviewees may be more sensitive to variations in interviewer manner and future research might usefully assess this possibility.

In practical terms the present findings suggest, in line with the conclusions of Haraldsson (1985) and Baxter and Boon (in press), that prospective users of the Gudjonsson scales should be aware that variations in their demeanour may bias their results with the consequent danger that they will fail to identify vulnerable witnesses if their demeanour is too mild, or may falsely identify acceptable witnesses as vulnerable if their demeanour is too severe. A comparison of the present findings with those of Baxter and Boon may provide profiles of two different types of problem interviewers. (That the comparability of these two studies should not be affected by the use in the present study of the GSS1, rather than the GSS2, is evident from the norms for the scales provided by Gudjonsson, 1997.)

Baxter and Boon (in press) varied the manner in which negative feedback was delivered when testing with the GSS2, but kept interviewer demeanour 'neutral' throughout the other stages of the procedure. They reported that an interviewer whose manner was 'stern' or 'severe' rather than 'firm' when delivering negative feedback produced higher Yield 2 and Shift scores when using the GSS2 than an interviewer whose manner was generally 'friendly' when delivering negative feedback. They found no significant differences in Total Suggestibility as a function of this manipulation. The method used in the present study essentially inverted the procedure used by Baxter and Boon: interviewer demeanour at negative feedback was 'firm' in both conditions (the closely comparable Yield 2 scores appear to confirm this), but general demeanour throughout the other stages of the GSS procedure was varied. This may mean that interviewers who misinterpret Gudjonsson's (1992, 1997) instruction to be 'firm' in delivering negative feedback, such that they are either too severe or too familiar, will tend to produce Yield 2 and Shift scores which are, on average, artificially too high or too low respectively. Their Total Suggestibility scores, however, may be less seriously affected by such variability. The present study shows, by contrast, that interviewers who deliver negative feedback correctly but whose demeanour is generally too severe or too familiar will produce normal Yield 2 scores but will also produce Shift and Total Suggestibility scores which are, on average, artificially too high or too low respectively. This may be the more serious problem than that identified by Baxter and Boon, given that it affects the key Total Suggestibility measure. Interviewers showing this constellation of scores may have a more general and less tractable difficulty than simply adopting the correct manner at negative feedback and may require careful monitoring.

Taken together, these two sets of findings suggest a further function of the Gudjonsson Suggestibility Scales. If Yield 1 is indeed relatively independent of interviewer manner, then GSS results which show normal Yield 1 scores but lowered or raised post-feedback scores may identify interviewees who are suggestible because they are particularly vulnerable to interpersonal pressure. However, such a pattern of scores may also identify interviewers whose manner is either especially informal or especially overbearing. It would seem therefore that anybody intending to use these scales for research, clinical or forensic purposes should first establish in practice sessions that their standard technique produces results closely comparable to the established norms for the scales (Baxter & Boon, in press).

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