

**Emotional intelligence in police interviews**  
**—Approach, training and the usefulness of the concept**

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**Abstract**

In police investigative interviews, investigators may encounter interviewees who are experiencing a wide range of emotional states that must be accommodated and managed to elicit information about a given event. The aim of this study was to explore how the theoretical concept of emotional intelligence may be of value in describing investigators' management of emotion in interviews. First, we define emotional intelligence in the context of investigative interviewing, emphasising empathy and emotion regulation. Then, we present four key considerations for training interviewers in managing emotions. The implications of implementing the concept of emotional intelligence in investigative interviewing are discussed.

**Keywords:** Police interview, emotional intelligence, rapport, police training

In police investigations, the investigative interview is one of the most important methods that investigators employ to elicit information about an event. The investigative interview is a conversation where the investigator aims to facilitate interviewees' accounts, be they a witness, a victim, a suspect or the accused. Police work often involves encounters with people experiencing a wide range of emotional states (Bakker & Heuven, 2006), which in the context of an investigative interview may prevent the interviewee from providing an optimal account. At the same time, the investigator is expected to manage these situations in ways that promote the individual's well-being and facilitate a detailed account. Managing emotional states may be related to the concept of emotional intelligence, that is, the individual's ability to use his or her understanding and knowledge of emotions to enhance his or her thinking (Mayer, Roberts, & Barsade, 2008). Research has shown that emotional intelligence predicts performance in professions requiring high levels of emotional labour (Joseph & Newman, 2010), such as policing (Ali, Garner, & Magadley, 2012; Daus & Ashkanasy, 2005). How and to what extent is emotional intelligence an essential property of investigative interviewing with adult, cooperative interviewees? How can police interviewers be trained in the management of interviewees' feelings? We address these issues by first defining emotional intelligence in the context of investigative interviewing, with an emphasis on empathy and emotion regulation. We present four key considerations for training interviewers to manage emotions before discussing the usefulness of the concept of emotional intelligence with regard to investigative interviewing.

There is little theory and research focusing on emotional intelligence in investigative interviewing, and we hope this article will contribute to the literature on this subject.

### **Investigative interviewing, rapport and emotional intelligence**

For information to be generated in a police interview, rapport must be developed—that is, a shared understanding and communication between the interviewer and interviewee. To achieve rapport, the interviewer must be open, flexible and able to adapt to the state and expressions of the interviewee through the use of different communication techniques or other relational approaches. The development of rapport may help the interviewee to feel safer and more comfortable, moving the individual into a state where it is easier to talk. This demonstrates the importance of the relational aspects of interviewing. Even though definitions of rapport in police interviews may vary (Holmberg & Madsen, 2014; Kieckhaefer, Vallano, & Compo, 2014), and there is a need for more research on how rapport contributes to interview outcomes (Abbe & Brandon, 2013; Vallano & Schreiber Compo, 2015), research has shown that rapport is an important determinant of the quality of investigative interviews (Abbe & Brandon, 2013; Alison, Alison, Noone, Elntib, & Christiansen, 2013; Collins, Lincoln, & Frank, 2002; Fisher, Milne, & Bull, 2011; Holmberg, 2004; Holmberg & Madsen, 2014; Kieckhaefer et al., 2014; Milne & Bull, 1999; Vallano & Schreiber Compo, 2011; Vanderhallen, Vervaeke, & Holmberg, 2011; Walsh & Bull, 2012).

In police interviewing, the investigator relies on the interviewees' communication of thoughts that may be affected by emotional activation, so-called "hot cognitions" (Safran & Greenberg, 1982). It is important to be aware of the impact of emotions, as they communicate a person's current state and their needs (Binder, 2014). Emotions influence perceptions, thinking, motivation and interpretations of events. Depending on the context, the police may encounter individuals experiencing various positive and negative emotions. These emotional states, whether joy and relief, or fear, sadness and anger, they influence the narrative of the interviewee, and thus must be made tolerable or accommodated by the interviewer to maintain rapport. The ability to manage emotions is key to the concept of emotional intelligence:

“...the ability to carry out accurate reasoning about emotions and the ability to use emotions and emotional knowledge to enhance thought (Mayer et al., 2008, p. 511)”. A fundamental aspect of emotional intelligence is understanding how emotions work, how emotional reactions are connected, and how to use this understanding to influence one’s own or others’ feelings and behaviour. This involves the ability to recognise, appraise and understand emotions on the basis of verbal and nonverbal expressions, to use emotions to enhance one’s thinking through reasoning or problem-solving, and to manage emotional responses. How is emotional intelligence applicable to a police interviewer? In the following example, we illustrate how emotional processes may occur in investigative interviewing and how they can be approached. The example is a composite—a hypothetical scenario created on the basis of observations of police interviews, a review of dialogue transcripts and discussions with investigators.

A 28-year-old woman attends a police interview after being subjected to violence by an unknown assailant at a bar a few days earlier. Immediately after the incident, she was rushed to the emergency room for medical care, so she has not been interviewed until now. The investigator assigned to conduct the interview takes the victim from the waiting room to the interview room. Initially, the investigator works to establish rapport. He asks how she is doing, before telling her about her rights and the regulations and informing her about the interview procedure. He asks whether she has any questions before he starts the interview by facilitating a free account from the interviewee.

1. *Interviewer*: I will ask you questions about the incident, where I want you to tell me as much as you can about what happened.

2. *Interviewee*: I don’t want to talk about it. I don’t feel good...

3. *Interviewer*: You don’t feel good?

4. *Interviewee*: (looking down, crossing her arms) It feels uncomfortable being here, I want to go home.

5. *Interviewer*: Is there anything we can do that may reduce the discomfort?

6. *Interviewee*: No, I just want to go home. I feel uneasy and nauseous; I just want to go home.

7. *Interviewer*: I can see that you're not comfortable. Many people who come to the police find it uncomfortable, often because they don't want to talk about something bad they have seen or been exposed to, and that's okay. And then we try to make the best of it.

8. *Interviewee*: I don't want to think about what happened.

9. *Interviewer*: I understand that it wasn't easy for you to come here today, and that it can be tough to talk about what happened. But you showed up for the interview, and that's good. Many who have been interviewed have said that it has felt good to be able to talk about something difficult in a place that's safe. Is it possible for you to tell me about what happened, and then we can take a break, drink some water or change the subject if you find that it has become difficult to talk?

10. *Interviewee*: I can try...

11. *Interviewer*: We police don't know what happened on Saturday, so we need your account to elucidate the incident as much as possible. I would like you to tell me everything you can remember, not omitting anything. Please describe it in as much detail as you can. You can now begin your explanation about the incident, and you can start where it feels natural...

The investigator tries to manage the interviewee's emotional responses by showing an awareness of her emotional activation (3, 7) and by expressing acceptance and understanding

of how she is feeling (7, 9). He then approaches the interviewee, emphasising problem-solving by accommodating her emotional needs (5, 9)—in this case, the need to regulate discomfort by providing support and safety. If we consider the emotional processes that may arise in investigative interviews, we can define emotional intelligence as: *the interviewer's use of his or her understanding of and approaches to emotional processes that have positive effects on the well-being of the interviewee and the generation of information.*

### **Approaching emotional states in investigative interviewing**

We assume that the greater the interviewee's sense of comfort and ease, the more he or she will tell the interviewer. Therefore, knowledge and skills in managing emotions are important in facilitating the interviewee's account. The process of accommodating emotional states also has the potential to ameliorate interviewees' negative feelings and thus promote the therapeutic jurisprudence (Fisher & Geiselman, 2010; Holmberg & Madsen, 2014). The investigator's approach in an interview is regulated by law and governed by the interview guide that he or she applies. At the same time, the interview is a dynamic, interpersonal process where the quality of the interview relationship varies because of social chemistry, the extent to which the parties understand each other, or other relational processes that affect an individual's state and behaviour. The investigative interview may be considered a difficult task for an investigator, who in addition to obtaining information and documenting the account must adapt to the interviewee and the experiences that may be reported. For example, the interviewer may need to adjust his or her communication techniques, attempt to understand how the interviewee feels or consider his or her psychological needs. Managing emotion entails approaching emotional experiences in ways that reduce discomfort, make feelings tolerable, and move the interviewee towards a state where he or she provides the

most informative account of events. Below, we describe empathy and emotion regulation as fundamental approaches to emotional intelligence in police interviews.

### *Empathy*

To appraise emotional expressions and respond appropriately, the investigator must understand what happens in the interview relationship. This understanding is related to empathy. Empathy as a concept and phenomenon has historically been defined in various ways in different disciplines (Duan & Hill, 1996; Wispe, 1986), and empathic processes can be said to be a facet of emotional intelligence (Mayer, Caruso, & Salovey, 1999). Empathy concerns understanding the experience of another person—his or her feelings, intentions and needs. Empathy can create an understanding of the other’s experience and perspective, making it possible to show compassion and act on the basis of a perception of the other person’s feelings (Binder, 2014). Empathy can be considered to be an attitude or a way of relating to experience, and research has shown that empathy is an important component in the development of rapport in investigative interviewing (Holmberg, 2004; Madsen & Holmberg, 2014). In interview guidance (e.g. Fisher & Geiselman, 1992; Milne & Bull, 1999; Shepherd & Griffiths, 2013), empathy and understanding is often connected to active listening. One aspect of active listening is communication techniques, for instance not interrupting the interviewee or using nonverbal behaviour to enhance communication. Another dimension is listening empathically for emotions, requiring that one is present, compassionate and sensitive to what happens in the process from moment to moment (Greenberg, 2014). To perceive emotions requires one to be observant of and sensitive to what is expressed, be it body language, facial expressions, the semantic content of the other’s words, or one’s own experienced feelings in the moment (Stiegler, 2015). Being observant of body language is particularly important, as emotional reactions are not always followed by cognitive



representations (Safran & Greenberg, 1982). In addition to empathic attention to the other's experience, Rogers (1961) emphasised the importance of communicating an obtained understanding. For example, if the interviewee experiences strong and chaotic emotions that make it difficult to talk about what occurred, the interviewer may affirm the experience of the interviewee by saying he understands that it can be difficult to talk about, and that this is not unusual. Showing personal concern and an understanding for the interviewees' plight should be considered important (Fisher & Geiselman, 2010). If the investigator tunes in to the emotional state of the interviewee and communicates understanding, it may lead to an experience of resonance—a way to feel understood that increases the relational connection with the other (Baldini, Parks, Nelson, & Siegel, 2014; Siegel, 2010). Resonance can contribute to an increased sense of acceptance and safety in the relationship that can make it easier for the interviewee to communicate what he/she has experienced (as described in the case example in the previous section). In addition, research on psychotherapy has shown how affirmative experiences can help regulate anxiety (Greenberg & Pascual-Leone, 2006), and it seems likely that similar processes may occur in investigative interviews.

### *Emotion regulation*

The conceptualisation of emotion regulation varies across and within different fields (Chambers, Gullone, & Allen, 2009; Lawrence, Troth, Jordan, & Collins, 2011), and the concept can be considered an essential part of emotional intelligence (Gohm, 2003; Mayer, Caruso, & Salovey, 1999; Mayer & Salovey, 1995; Pena-Sarrionandia, Mikolajczak, & Gross, 2015; Thory, 2013). Regulating emotions is about adapting to emotions and is relevant to different processes of the investigative interview. For instance, the interviewer may engage in processes that influence the emotional state of the interviewee or his or her own reactions. Traces of emotion regulation can also be seen in guidelines for investigative interviewing

emphasizing the importance of reducing anxiety or arousal to facilitate rapport and maximise interviewees' recollection (e.g. Fisher & Geiselman, 1992; Home Office, 2011)

We use Gross's (1998) definition of emotion regulation, which emphasises the process of modulating one or more aspects of emotional experience or response—how the individual affects the feeling that is experienced in terms of its intensity, duration and expression. Emotion regulation concerns the ways in which the individual can increase, maintain or decrease one or more experiential or behavioural components of emotion. This implies a response tendency perspective, where the experience of an emotion can induce a tendency for a person to experience a situation or react in a given way, and this tendency can be influenced. The definition is based on the regulation of one's own emotions, but our notion is that the understanding of emotion regulation as an intrapsychological process may contribute to active, interpersonal approaches that can affect the emotions of others. In investigative interviewing, emotion regulation may be of particular importance in three processes: i) reducing the risk of the interviewee developing negative emotions, ii) responding to emotional activation when it occurs, and iii) regulating the investigator's own emotions.

In an interview, the investigator should initially encourage the interviewee to participate actively (Fisher & Geiselman, 1992; Milne & Bull, 1999). The interviewee should be told explicitly that it is he or she who has the information, who must do most of the talking, and who in many respects controls the interview process. Furthermore, the investigator should prepare the interviewee by describing the phases of the interview to reduce potential uncertainty or anxiety about the process. In the interview, it may be beneficial to reassure the interviewee by encouraging or expressing positive reactions to his or her efforts to strengthen self-efficacy and the experience of being appreciated (Fisher & Geiselman, 2010). In many ways, an empathic attitude or mode can be considered a prerequisite to assisting another's regulation of emotion; one should have an understanding of

the interviewee's feelings and psychological needs to affect his or her experience in a good way. Empathy and understanding may involve meeting sadness with comfort, anxiety with reassurance, or showing acceptance if the interviewee expresses guilt, shame or anger. During the interview, emotions can be actively regulated via various processes, such as modifying the situation (for example, providing a break), changing the focus of attention (for example, changing the topic of conversation), change in cognition (for example by helping the interviewee to see the positive aspects of their own efforts if he or she should experience feelings of inadequacy) or changing the response to an emotion (for example, by asking the interviewee to take deep breaths if he or she becomes upset). If the interviewee finds the interviewer accommodating and feels that his or her emotional activation has been received in a good manner, it may encourage the individual to continue his or her account, providing more details of the event.

Throughout the interview, it is vital that the interviewer is aware of potential resistance or relational breaches that might arise in the interview relationship. For instance, if the interviewee feels that he or she is not being understood, respected or taken seriously, it may lead to negative feelings and reluctance to continue the interview. This may necessitate the interviewer regulating emotions actively. In such instances, he or she should focus on understanding the causes of the resistance or breach and the underlying potential psychological needs that may exist. If the interviewee expresses frustration and a feeling of being misunderstood, the interviewer must attempt to understand what is happening and communicate this understanding. Sometimes, inappropriate or disruptive behaviour may occur. For example if the interviewee is dismissive or refuses to answer questions. In such cases, it may be appropriate to use approaches more often seen in suspect interviews. One approach to such situations is the DEAL technique which aims to manage disruptive or

inappropriate behaviour through describing and explaining the potential effects and consequences of the behaviour (Shepherd & Griffiths, 2013).

The requirement for the investigator to manage his or her own emotional experiences can be seen in the preparations for the interview, during the interview process and after the interview is completed. Prior to the interview, the interviewer may be influenced by thoughts and feelings concerning the assignment. For instance whether he or she feels prepared for the interview or has any concerns about the process. It is important that the investigator is attentive and aware of his or her emotional processes. For example, to minimise the influence of negative countertransference in the development and maintenance of rapport (St-Yves, 2006). During the interview, several situations may trigger emotional reactions in the interviewer, such as being provoked or hearing gruesome details of an event. If the interviewer experiences an emotional activation that interferes with his or her ability to participate in constructive communication with the interviewee, the investigator must regulate his or her own emotions. They could, for example take a break to discuss the matter with colleagues or focus attention on thoughts and feelings perceived as helpful (Chambers et al., 2009). Moreover, it is important to acknowledge the stressful nature of police work, which requires the investigator to be conscious of his or her own needs with regard to avoiding secondary traumatisation or other potentially negative effects that the work may have on his or her health. This can be managed by the investigator working on his or her own emotion regulation or seeking psychosocial assistance when needed.

### **Training in handling emotions**

Research has provided evaluations of and suggestions for investigative interviewing training programs (see for example Clarke & Milne, 2001; Powell, Fisher, & Wright, 2007), but to our

knowledge there is little specific training in managing emotions in police interviews. Dealing with emotions is no easy task. It is dependent on individual factors as well as context.

Managing emotions is an important aspect of a range of professions, and consequently should be an important part of the respective education or training. Research has examined training related to emotional intelligence. Several studies on students in medicine and psychology have considered whether and how empathy can be learned (Batt-Rawden, Chisolm, Anton, & Flickinger, 2013; Carkhuff & Truax, 1965; Spiro, 1992; van Berkhout & Malouff, 2015).

Training in emotional intelligence or management of emotions can take various forms, whether it is through a didactic approach, experiential exercises or ability/skill training.

Below, we suggest four key considerations for training in managing emotions during investigative interviews: (i) self-awareness, (ii) attention training, (iii) communication skills and (iv) emotion regulation.

### *Self-awareness*

To develop empathy, it is important for a student to be aware of who he or she is as a person and what may stand in the way of empathic experiences. Having an awareness of oneself concerns reflections about one's own values, attitudes, resources, vulnerabilities, roles and motivation. For an investigator, it may involve an awareness of his or her own motivation to work as a police officer or to reflect on what type of interviewer he or she wants to be. Such subjects may be suitable bases for reflection tasks within a training programme for investigative interviewing. The idea is that the more conscious the interviewer is of personal issues, the more energy will be available to attend to the empathic processes in interviews. Other subjects that may be suitable for discussion are the interviewer's own experiences with empathy, the significance of an empathic versus a non-empathic interviewing style for the outcomes of investigative interviews, or any emotions that are difficult to confront. Davis

(1990) suggests the importance of facilitating situations where empathic processes can occur as well as emphasising how training should help the candidate to become more conscious of aspects of oneself that may block empathic experience, i.e., prejudice, low self-esteem, anxiety and poor listening skills. She suggests that this type of self-awareness is necessary for the individual to take responsibility for personal change and to facilitate empathic experiences.

### *Attention training*

Empathic processes require attention to the other's experiences and expressions. Research has shown how attention training, such as mindfulness training, can increase empathy (Shapiro, Schwartz, & Bonner, 1998). Englander and Folkesson (2014) have described a phenomenological approach to empathy training for therapists. Students were first taught theory on phenomenological attitude before they underwent exercises in openness and directing their primary attention to the meaning of others' expressions. The phenomenological emphasis on another's experience made it possible for empathy to arise spontaneously and for greater intersubjectivity to be experienced. Training for investigative interviewers could be conducted in a similar fashion, for instance via exercises where the interviewer is encouraged to direct attention to the other's experiences, perspectives and expressions whilst seeking an understanding of the underlying feelings and needs communicated. This can be done through exercises where a person interviews another person. For example, someone with a different perspective than their own or an interviewee with a trivial problem of which the interviewer must attempt to show an empathic understanding. Such exercises should be followed by the student reflecting on the relationship between empathy theory in relation to their own practice or interpersonal style, such as through discussions in groups or by feedback from a supervisor about alternative empathic approaches.

### *Communication skills*

Many research-based interview guidelines have described communication skills intended to facilitate the narratives of interviewees (e.g. Fisher et al., 2011; Milne & Bull, 1999), and these techniques can obviously be applied when approaching emotional states in investigative interviews. In training in various techniques, it may be appropriate for students to see an expert demonstrate good practices. For example through the use of training videos as modelling behaviour (Powell et al., 2007). Additionally, students should undertake role-play exercises and be facilitated in discussions of alternative empathic responses or techniques in relation to a presented narrative. Examples of such techniques or approaches may be found in Shepherd and Griffiths' (2013) description of SOFTENS behaviour, such as employing an open posture, leaning forward, giving eye-contact and expressing supportive words and sounds when appropriate.

### *Emotion regulation*

Training in emotion regulation should emphasise the expansion of the individual's knowledge of emotions, how they are perceived and how they may affect individuals for better or worse. This can be done through theoretical lectures about the phenomenology of emotions or by assigning students tasks concerning the identification of emotions and emotional needs. Efforts should be made to learn strategies to regulate the emotions of interviewees. This can be achieved through role-plays of different approaches to interviewees expressing feelings of fear, anger or sadness. Furthermore, the investigator's ability to regulate his or her own emotions during interviews should be emphasised, for instance by helping students to become aware of the connection between their own thoughts, feelings and behaviour. Other aspects

could be more practical, such as learning to manage stress, exercise self-compassion and self-care (Binder & Hjeltnes, 2013; Shapiro, Brown, & Biegel, 2007; Shapiro et al., 1998) or learning ways to regulate their own emotions through specific strategies, such as attentional deployment (to guide attention to affect emotions), cognitive change strategies (reframing the event) and response modulation strategies (modification of emotions by influencing physical experiences or by reducing or enhancing their expression) (Thory, 2013).

### **Emotional intelligence—a useful concept to understand well-conducted investigative interviews?**

We began by asking how and to what extent emotional intelligence can be considered an essential property of investigative interviewing. Then, we presented empathy and emotion regulation in an attempt to connect emotional intelligence with investigative interviewing. Considering the construct of emotional intelligence in investigative interviewing has both advantages and limitations. The most obvious advantage is that the concept can contribute to increased awareness of emotional experiences in police interviews, both by shedding light on emotional processes and by suggesting how these can be accommodated. The construct enables the description of specific approaches to emotions; these approaches in an educational context can help students to expand upon their behavioural repertoire. In this respect, the term itself can increase emotional intelligence, whereas knowledge of feelings and approaches can lead to enhanced thinking about emotions. An emphasis on emotions and accommodating emotional needs may in many ways be related to a humanitarian interviewing style (Holmberg, 2004; Holmberg & Christianson, 2002). This approach has been shown to have a positive impact on the development of a working alliance with interviewees (Vanderhallen et al., 2011), the amount of information generated, the interviewees' personal well-being and



therapeutic jurisprudence (Holmberg & Madsen, 2014). In this respect, emotional intelligence may be considered one of several factors that explain what happens in well-conducted investigative interviews.

On the other hand, the construct of emotional intelligence can be described as controversial. For example, research has questioned how it should be defined (Cherniss, 2010) and measured (Conte, 2005). Our theoretical point of departure was the definition of emotional intelligence by Mayer et al. (2008), which we considered to have a functional value in describing the properties of emotional intelligence that are relevant to investigative interviewing. However, when we apply the concept to investigative interviewing it identifies goals to a greater extent than it describes how to reach them. This gives us the freedom to define processes of emotional intelligence in the context of a police interview but, at the same time, it creates potential theoretical pitfalls. In our perspective on emotional intelligence, we emphasised interpersonal processes intended to promote interviewees' well-being based on the rationale that the more comfortable the interviewee feels, the more information is likely to be generated. A potential disadvantage of this priority is that attention may wander too far from obtaining information, which in many respects is the police's main task in an investigative interview. It might be that these relational approaches should have been presented with a greater emphasis on communication techniques, as described in the cognitive interview for example (Fisher & Geiselman, 1992, 2010; Fisher et al., 2011). Moreover, some might argue that other approaches to emotions would have been more appropriate in police interviewing, such as emotion-focused coping, which to a greater extent emphasises a stress management perspective (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

Research has shown that training in emotional intelligence has a positive effect on the interpersonal aspects of professional practice, such as in health professions (Libbrecht, Lievens, Carette, & Cote, 2014; Reeves, 2005), and it is not unlikely that similar effects

would apply to police interviewing. We presented four key considerations for training in managing emotions in investigative interviewing. The topics we emphasised were a result of a theoretical assessment that is undoubtedly influenced by our background and experience, implying that others might have prioritised differently. Moreover, the approaches we presented were based on research from fields other than police training, and whether this can be generalised to investigative interviewing is open for discussion. This means we do not have a definitive solution for the training of police interviewers in managing emotions, only suggestions for topics that should be covered.

### **Future directions**

Based on what we have described, we are curious about the pragmatic value of our approach to emotional intelligence, especially with regard to emotion regulation. It would be interesting to conduct empirical research on how and to what extent different approaches to emotion regulation influence the quality of police interviews, for instance, through field observations or experiments. It would also be interesting to implement the four themes we presented for training in an educational setting to assess whether training has any effect on emotional intelligence. This could be measured before and after course completion using already established measures of emotional intelligence (such as MSCEIT V2.0 or the Bar-On Emotional Quotient Inventory).

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