



## Using the Scharff-technique to elicit information: How to effectively establish the “illusion of knowing it all”?



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### ABSTRACT

The Scharff-technique is used for eliciting information from human sources. At the very core of the technique is the “illusion of knowing it all” tactic, which aims to inflate a source’s perception of how much knowledge an interviewer holds about the event to be discussed. For the current study, we mapped the effects following two different ways of introducing this particular tactic; a traditional way of implementation where the interviewer explicitly states that s/he already knows most of the important information (the *traditional condition*), and a new way of implementation where the interviewer just starts to present the information that s/he holds (the *just start condition*). The two versions were compared in two separate experiments. In Experiment 1 ( $N=60$ ), we measured the participants’ perceptions of the interviewer’s knowledge, and in Experiment 2 ( $N=60$ ), the participants’ perceptions of the interviewer’s knowledge gaps. We found that participants in the just start condition (a) believed the interviewer had more knowledge (Experiment 1), and (b) searched less actively for gaps in the interviewer’s knowledge (Experiment 2), compared to the traditional condition. We will discuss the current findings and how sources test and perceive the knowledge his or her interviewer possesses within a framework of social hypothesis testing.

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### La utilización de la técnica de Scharff para extraer información: cómo crear la “ilusión de saberlo todo” de un modo eficaz?

#### RESUMEN

La técnica de Scharff se utiliza para extraer información de fuentes humanas. En el meollo de la técnica está la táctica de la “ilusión de saberlo todo”, que apunta a engordar la percepción de una fuente sobre cuánto conocimiento posee un entrevistador sobre el hecho que se aborda. Para realizar este estudio cartografiamos los efectos derivados de la introducción de esta táctica particular, un método tradicional de aplicación, en el que el entrevistador afirma de modo explícito que ya conoce casi toda la información importante (la *condición tradicional*) y una manera nueva de implementación, en la que el entrevistador empieza a presentar la información que posee (la *condición de simplemente iniciar la condición*). Se comparó ambas versiones en dos experimentos distintos. En el experimento 1 ( $N=60$ ) medimos la percepción que tenían los participantes de los conocimientos del entrevistador y en el experimento 2 ( $N=60$ ) la percepción que tenían los participantes de las lagunas de conocimiento del entrevistador. Se halló que los participantes de la condición de “simplemente iniciar” (a) creían que el entrevistador poseía más conocimientos (experimento 1) y (b) buscaban de un modo menos activo las lagunas de conocimiento del entrevistador (experimento 2), en comparación con la condición “tradicional”. Comentaremos estos

#### Palabras clave:

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resultados y cómo perciben y ponen a prueba las fuentes los conocimientos de su entrevistador, en el marco de la prueba de hipótesis social.

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Human intelligence (HUMINT) is “a category of intelligence derived from information collected and provided by human sources” (NATO, 2014, p. 115). Typically, in a HUMINT interaction an interviewer aims to collect information about past or future criminal activities (Evans, Meissner, Brandon, Russano, & Kleinman, 2010; Vrij & Granhag, 2014). A specific form of HUMINT gathering is information elicitation, for which the goal is to collect information in such a manner that the sources remain unaware of the true purpose of the interaction (Justice, Bhatt, Brandon, & Kleinman, 2010). The main aims are here that the sources underestimate how much new information they have revealed and remain unaware of the interviewer’s information objectives.

Humans who strive toward goals develop strategies and plans (Fiske & Taylor, 1991, 2008). In the HUMINT context, sources often aim for a specific goal (e.g., money or protection from prosecution) and what they offer in return is information. Additionally, sources are often cooperative to some extent; they are willing to share some but not all information they hold. In order to pursue their goal, sources often use so-called counter-interrogation strategies; for example, “I will not say very much during the interrogation,” “I will try to figure out what they are after, and then make sure I do not give them what they want,” and “It is meaningless to deny or withhold what they already know” (Scharff, 1950; Soufan, 2011; Toliver, 1997). Recently, Alison et al. (2014) presented a field study in which they showed the relevance of such counter-interrogation strategies.

### The Scharff-technique

The Scharff-technique aims to collect information from sources that are motivated to reveal some but not all information (Granhag, 2010). An interviewer taking the perspective of the source lies at the very core of the Scharff-technique. Perspective taking refers to the “cognitive capacity to consider the world from other viewpoints and allows an individual to anticipate the behavior and reactions of others” (Galinsky, Maddux, Gilin, & White, 2008, p. 378). Taking the perspective of others is effective in negotiations (Galinsky & Mussweiler, 2001), and of importance for criminal and HUMINT interviewers (Granhag & Hartwig, 2015; Soufan, 2011).

The Scharff-technique is a collection of tactics that draws on the interviewer’s insights about the source’s goals and counter-interrogation strategies (Granhag, 2010). The *friendly approach tactic* stipulates that the interviewer establishes and maintains a pleasant, conversational atmosphere during the interview. When employing the *illusion of knowing it all tactic*, the interviewer presents already known information, makes clear that s/he is well-informed regarding the topic to be discussed, and gives the source the opportunity to add details. The *confirmation/disconfirmation tactic* aims to elicit specific pieces of information as the interviewer presents claims that s/he seeks to have affirmed or negated. The *not pressing for information tactic* requires the interviewer to collect information by asking very few, if any, questions. Finally, using the *ignore new information tactic* means the interviewer conceals his or her interest for information and treats the information that the source reveals as known or unimportant (for more detailed descriptions on the Scharff tactics, see Granhag, Montecinos, & Oleszkiewicz, 2015; May, Granhag, & Oleszkiewicz, 2014).

In a series of studies, the Scharff-technique has been compared to the Direct Approach, which is a combination of open-ended and specific questions (US Army, 2006). In accordance with the Field Manual 2–22.3 (US Army, 2006) and the Executive Order No. 13941 (US Government, 2009), the Direct Approach is the most commonly used intelligence interviewing technique in the field (Redlich, Kelly, & Miller, 2011; Semel, 2013). All previous studies have used an experimental paradigm mirroring important features of a typical HUMINT interaction (Granhag et al., 2015a). Simply put, participants received incomplete information on a planned attack and were instructed to strike a balance between not revealing too much or too little information in a subsequent interview. In past studies, the Scharff-technique has outperformed the Direct Approach by all important measures. First, the Scharff-technique resulted in relatively more new information (e.g., May & Granhag, 2015; see Granhag, Oleszkiewicz, Strömwall, & Kleinman, 2015 for sources who varied in their levels of cooperation and knowledge). Second, the sources interviewed with the Scharff-technique underestimated how much new information they revealed, whereas the sources interviewed with the Direct Approach overestimated how much new information they revealed (e.g., May et al., 2014; Oleszkiewicz, Granhag, & Cancino Montecinos, 2014). Finally, the sources interviewed by the Scharff-technique found it relatively more difficult to read the interviewer’s information objective (e.g., May et al., 2014; Oleszkiewicz, Granhag, & Kleinman, 2014).

In previous studies, the illusion of knowing it all tactic played an important role in terms of collecting new information. The presentation of known information (i.e., the illusion of knowing it all tactic) followed by an open-ended question resulted in more new information compared to simply asking an open-ended question (e.g., May et al., 2014; Oleszkiewicz et al., 2014a). That is, by presenting known information, the interviewer made the source to reveal information beyond what was disclosed by the interviewer. Another aim of the illusion of knowing it all tactic is to inflate the source’s perception of how much knowledge the interviewer holds about the event. Specifically, the interviewer steers the source’s focus towards his or her knowledge of the event and steers it away from his or her knowledge gaps. The current study is about the efficacy of different ways of introducing the illusion of knowing it all tactic aiming to inflate the source’s perception of the interviewer’s knowledge.

### Sources Exploring the Interviewer’s Knowledge

Humans are naturally goal-oriented (Aarts, 2012), and in order to decide if and how to pursue a goal, they form and test hypotheses. Trope and Liberman (1996) presented a framework for social hypothesis testing that consists of five steps and can be applied to a source that tests the amount and relevance of an interviewer’s knowledge. At first, the source may formulate a hypothesis (e.g., “The interviewer holds some important information”). S/he may then derive if-then rules from stored knowledge in order to test the hypothesis (e.g., “If the interviewer holds important information, then s/he knows who founded the group”). In the third step the source searches for relevant information in his or her memory from past interviews or actively during an ongoing interaction with the interviewer in order to test these if-then rules (e.g., “The interviewer knows that a woman founded the group”). In accordance

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