Witness assessment of vehicles in traffic collisions

Protecting eyewitness evidence: What can the Self Administered Interview (SAI) contribute to the investigation of Road Traffic Accidents

Incomplete Wheel Lockup
Protecting Eyewitness Evidence: What can the Self Administered Interview (SAI) contribute to the investigation of Road Traffic Incidents?

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In the aftermath of a traffic incident, the key priority for emergency responders will be to recover injured victims and secure the scene for subsequent investigation. However, at that scene there may be a number of witnesses who hold important information about the collision – bystanders, pedestrians, drivers and passengers of vehicles not involved in the incident etc. All too often such witnesses simply leave the scene of traffic incidents and are lost to the subsequent investigation.

On the arrival at the scene of incidents, given limited resources, Road Traffic Officers are unlikely to be able to capitalize on multiple witnesses and will instead typically attempt to identify a smaller number of key witnesses. This strategy can be problematic. First, officers arriving at a disorganized, dangerous or traumatic scene may experience some difficulty in identifying key witnesses. Second, limiting the focus of the investigation to only a small number of apparently informative witnesses at such an early stage is problematic in that the selected witnesses may not be able to provide complete or reliable accounts. Officers may need further information from additional witnesses to move the investigation forward. If follow-up enquiries do take place, several weeks or months may have elapsed by which time the witness may no longer be able to report useful fine-grained details about the accident or collision they saw.

The current article introduces a new tool designed specifically to assist investigators in such circumstances: the Self Administered Interview (SAI). The SAI is based on the principle that the sooner a witness can provide a detailed account, the more detailed and accurate the information provided is likely to be.

THE SELF-ADMINISTERED INTERVIEW

The Self-Administered Interview (SAI) tool, which draws on core principles of the cognitive interview technique, has been developed to preserve and protect eyewitness memory by eliciting a detailed recall account at the scene of an incident or soon after. Eyewitness memory for details of a witnessed incident is under threat in two key ways:

In any witnessing situation, memory is prone to decay and this “forgetting” will occur naturally and shortly after the incident. As the delay between witnessing and formal interview increases, memory decay will level off so while witnesses may still be able to provide a general account, potentially vital details for an investigation may have been irretrievably lost. Another important threat to accurate witness recall is contamination of the original memory by erroneous information encountered between actually witnessing the event and providing investigators with an account of the incident. As with any incident, both decay and distortion are factors which affect the recall of witnesses to dramatic one-off events such as traffic accidents. These problems are often compounded by inaccurate media reporting and access to other second-hand knowledge. Even multiple re-tellings of the ‘story’ of the incident in different social contexts can affect the accuracy of witness memory. How might these challenges facing investigators be tackled?

Over the past six years, our research team, based in the UK and US, has been working on the development of a recall protocol or ‘tool’ that will help incident protect witness memory at the scene of an incident or accident or shortly thereafter. Early development of the SAI focused on creating a clear set of written instructions and questions that could easily be understood by
witnesses. In the first test of the SAI	extsuperscript{1} mock witnesses (comprising a sample of community volunteers of all ages and backgrounds) viewed a simulated event and were required to report as much as they could about what they had seen. Witnesses in the sample who were required to complete the SAI	extsuperscript{1} tool reported 42% more correct details than those participants who were simply asked to report what they had seen. In a second study, two groups of community-based volunteers viewed a simulated crime event. After witnessing the event, half the participants were required to complete the SAI	extsuperscript{1} and record their recall of the event in detail, while the other half simply provided their name and contact details. The same participants were recalled to the laboratory after seven days and asked to produce a full account of what they had witnessed a week previously. Mock witnesses who had completed the SAI	extsuperscript{1} tool shortly after witnessing the event provided almost 30% more correct details than those who had not made an earlier recall attempt. These results indicate that the SAI	extsuperscript{1} prevents against memory loss. Our most recent research has replicated and extended these findings. Specifically, we have found that mock witnesses who complete an SAI	extsuperscript{1} after witnessing a simulated crime remember more information following a delay of one month than do control participants (who have not completed an SAI	extsuperscript{1}) after a delay of one week. Furthermore, mock witnesses who complete an SAI	extsuperscript{1} are more resistant to the erroneous or misleading information they are exposed to after the event. In addition to obvious benefits of enhanced witness recall, the use of a standardized form at the scene of an incident may also serve to limit any suggestion of 'improper' interviewing techniques and/or reduce any pressure from police or other interviewers which might be inadvertently perceived by witnesses. Furthermore, distribution of the SAI	extsuperscript{1} should also free up investigator resources and allow numerous witnesses to provide evidence simultaneously and efficiently.

The SAI	extsuperscript{1} has been designed to be usable as a generic tool for reporting different types of witnessed incidents, including crimes, traffic accidents, and other events. It currently takes the form of a paper booklet (although clearly there are possibilities in the future for online and other alternative formats) and comprises seven sections containing information and instructions designed to facilitate both recall and reporting of memories for a witnessed event. The generic nature of the format, instructions and cues permit the reporting of details of any witnessed incident. With a particular focus on the needs of traffic incident investigations, the SAI	extsuperscript{1} includes a section to record a sketch of the scene (witnesses are instructed to label components and indicate direction of movement). A subsequent section provides cues to prompt reporting of details pertaining to any vehicles involved in the incident. Information about the viewing and contemporary weather conditions is also prompted.

Generating a tool that enables cooperative - and often, highly motivated - witnesses to produce their own high quality accounts without draining police resources provides a useful solution to the problem of multiple witnesses and limited resources. Such accounts can then be evaluated by investigators to determine whether the witness deserves further attention by the investigative team. Importantly, the witness's account is no longer lost (or in the process of decay) while such pragmatic operational decisions are made. Enabling witnesses to produce their own initial account, facilitated by appropriate retrieval techniques offers a clear benefit to both witnesses and investigators.

**TAKING THE SAI	extsuperscript{1} TO THE ROADSIDE**

During the development and laboratory testing of the SAI	extsuperscript{1}, a key goal of the research was to produce a practical tool based on sound psychological science with the capacity to make a significant contribution to the investigatory process. However, while laboratory simulations provide an excellent environment for proof of concept testing, no interviewing tool or technique can be adequately tested in such a sterile environment. Many real crimes, accidents and incidents are likely to be arousing, confusing, unexpected and potentially traumatic. In many cases, witnessing conditions will fall far short of the optimal conditions typically associated with laboratory tests. Therefore, it was vital to test the SAI	extsuperscript{1} in the field with witnesses to real-time incidents.

Field trials of the SAI	extsuperscript{1} commenced in early 2009 and were endorsed in England and Wales by the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) Investigative Interviewing research committee. The overall aim of the trials was to establish
whether the SAi³ could demonstrate both practical and evidential benefits to the police during investigations by eliciting high quality witness accounts in the field. Several UK forces, including one large metropolitan force, joined the trials on a self-selecting responsive basis and trials in a number of forces remain on-going to evaluate the impact of using the SAi³ over an extended period. A number of police forces internationally are also evaluating the tool and, to date, the SAi³ has been translated into five languages.

The key objectives of the trials were to examine the nature of information provided by witnesses using the SAi³, elicit end-user evaluations of the SAi³ and identify the witnessing contexts in which the SAi³ provides most benefit to police investigation. During trials the SAi³ was usually administered in incidents where multiple witnesses were present at the scene. Broadly, the following procedure was adopted (although there were operational variations between forces): Lead investigators determined whether the SAi³ was appropriate in light of the incident and available witnesses; key witnesses were taken for interview as per standard procedure while remaining witnesses were issued with an SAi³ to complete at the scene (where possible). Where completion at the scene was not possible, witness details/information was recorded as usual but witnesses were then issued with an SAi³ and requested to return the SAi³ as soon as possible (or informed that it would be collected by officers).

**CASE STUDY: ROAD TRAFFIC FATALITY**

What follows is a Case Study provided by Greater Manchester Police where the use of the SAi³ contributed significantly to the investigation and subsequent building of a case against the defendants. The witnessed incident involved a serious road traffic incident. Three young males were (illegally) riding an off-road motorbike down a busy city street. The motorbike collided with a car at approximately 60 miles per hour. The motorbike rider and passengers were thrown from the motorbike into the path of an oncoming bus following the initial collision with the car. One of the males was killed while both other riders were seriously injured (although reports suggest that one of the injured riders attempted to abscend from the scene after the collision). Two Road Traffic officers responded to the incident and identified 16 witnesses to the collision. Eight of these witnesses were prioritised as key witnesses at the scene and were interviewed by police shortly after the incident. The remaining eight witnesses were issued with an SAi³. The completed SAi³ booklets were redacted to preserve witness confidentiality and then submitted to the research team.

Seven out of eight witnesses submitted a completed SAi³ detailing their account of the incident. Witnesses provided an average of 54 lines of text (2.5 A4 pages) in the initial ‘report everything’ section and the information provided was largely relevant and specific. Completed SAi³ booklets for the seven witnesses were also coded for corroborative details such that for each detail provided, the number of co-witness who also mentioned that detail was logged. At least five of the seven accounts provided corroborative information with respect to the following details: time and location of the incident, visibility at the time of the incident, descriptions of the three individuals on a motorbike, speed of the motorbike, make and color of the car involved in the initial collision, actions of the youths prior to and immediately after the collision, and appearance and actions of other witnesses at the scene.

The investigating officers in this case evaluated the impact of the information obtained using the SAi³ and concluded that the accounts provided were comprehensive and detailed, containing useful information for legally proving the case against the defendants, and establishing the charge as a joint venture. Furthermore, using the SAi³ permitted them to identify three further key witnesses who provided formal statements containing important information concerning the actions of the motorbike rider and passengers leading up to the incident. The officers also noted that using the SAi³ in this investigation had saved them a “great deal of time”, an important consideration given trends towards reduced resources for policing in the current financial climate.

**SOME CAVEATS TO CONSIDER**

Of course, the SAi³ is not a panacea to all the challenges faced by investigators of road traffic incidents (or, indeed, any incident). Certainly,
unmotivated or non-compliant witnesses are unlikely to commit much time or effort to completing an SAI. In which case, the investigators can simply record their contact details and pursue further details at some later point (this is effectively what happens at present with witnesses who are not identified as key at the scene). Some witnesses may find the SAI unhelpful. For example, witnesses who require emotional support or ‘social scaffolding’ when providing their accounts may find it difficult to work independently – although this is an empirical question. Similarly, traumatised witnesses should be treated with discretion. Witnesses who experience literacy or lack confidence in written expression may be reluctant to engage with an SAI. In such cases, alternative methods of procuring accounts from these witnesses must be identified. Similarly, the needs of witnesses for whom English is a second or limited language may need to be considered. It is worth noting, however, that the SAI has already been translated into a number of different languages. Practitioners have also suggested that encouraging foreign language speakers to recall an account in an appropriately translated version of the SAI may, in fact, be extremely beneficial during an investigation as access to interview translates can be limited and may involve significant delays.

**HOW CAN THE SAI CONTRIBUTE TO ROAD TRAFFIC INVESTIGATIONS?**

Road traffic accidents and incidents may have been witnessed by multiple witnesses. Incidents on busy streets, roads or motorways may involve a large number of witnesses – some of whom are likely to have important information to contribute to the investigation. Premised on robust psychological principles the SAI is an effective and efficient investigative tool that preserves and protects witness memory in such circumstances and elicits detailed accounts with high accuracy rates. The SAI should be particularly beneficial to officers at the scene of road traffic incidents where resources are likely to be limited. Gathering as much information as possible from those witnesses will significantly increase both the quality and quantity of information available to investigators. Essentially, the SAI provides investigators with a useful tool in the investigative tool box – a tool which works to improving the long-term outcomes for witnesses and victims of road traffic accidents.

You can read more about the SAI at [www.selfadministeredinterview.com](http://www.selfadministeredinterview.com).

**REFERENCES**
