Are You Telling Me the Truth?
Indicators of Veracity in Written Statements
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While reporting her abduction from a shopping center parking lot, a young woman described seemingly implausible events to responding officers. When they asked her to recount everything that happened, however, she described the smell of motor oil on the assailant’s hands. Her inclusion of such a unique sensory detail as a specific smell alerted the officers to the possibility that the allegation, as improbable as it appeared, might be true. Further investigation confirmed that the victim provided a truthful account.

Investigators frequently focus on indicators of deception\(^1\) to determine whether a suspect’s or victim’s account of a criminal incident is truthful or deceptive. Often, however, they overlook indicators of truthfulness, or veracity,\(^2\) in the process. To study the relationships between veracity and features of written statements, the authors examined 60 narratives written by suspects and victims. The authors found three features of the statements—the length of the criminal incident section, the presence of unique sensory details, and the inclusion of emotions—that accurately discriminated truthful statements from deceptive ones.

**Length of Criminal Incident Section**

Suspects and victims depicting criminal incidents typically include information preceding and following the description of the incident itself. Because of this, investigators can divide written statements into three sections: the introduction, the criminal incident, and the conclusion. The introduction establishes the context of the crime by providing details of when and where specific actions occurred. The criminal incident section answers the questions of what happened, how the crime occurred, and who was involved. The conclusion portrays the individual’s actions following the crime, such as calling 911, crying, or shaking.

In calculating the length of each section in a statement, the first word of the statement marks the beginning of the introduction. The point in the statement where the criminal incident begins also determines the end of the introduction. The conclusion starts when the criminal incident section stops and then continues to the end of the statement. The following quotes from a robbery statement illustrate these three sections:

**Introduction:**

“My husband and I were sitting in the first booth on the right as you come into the restaurant.”

**Criminal incident:**

“I heard a loud bang, like a firecracker, and shouts to lay down on the floor, and I knew the restaurant was being robbed. I saw two men with ski masks. The taller man had a rifle or a shotgun.”
Conclusion:

“We stayed under the table until the police came.”

In this statement, the introduction section began with the first word. The criminal incident section started when the restaurant patron described hearing the loud bang of a gunshot because, at this point, law enforcement authorities would intervene. This section continued until the description of the robbery ended. The conclusion section followed, with a description of the actions occurring after the robbery.

Investigators actually can draw a border around the criminal incident section. By simply glancing at the entire written statement, they can see the relative length of the criminal incident section. Those desiring a more accurate technique for examining the balance of the statement can calculate the word-count percentage of each section by dividing the total number of words in the statement into the number of words in each section. Through examination of the word-count percentages of the three sections of a written statement, investigators can determine the relative lengths of each section.

When individuals provide written statements about criminal events, the incident section should contain the greatest percentage of words because it constitutes the focus of the statement. Individuals who provide a much longer introduction than criminal incident section may be delaying the discussion of the incident by focusing on previous actions. A reference to the length of introductions appeared as early as 104 to 63 B.C. in one of the Apocryphal books, which relates the history of Judas Maccabees prefaced by a verse from 2 Maccabees 2:32: “At this point, therefore, let us begin our narrative, without adding any more to what has already been said, for it would be foolish to lengthen the preface while cutting short the history itself.” The suspect or victim who lengthens the introduction while cutting short the criminal incident section may be revealing the likelihood that the statement contains deception.

A missing person case can illustrate the value of examining the relative lengths of the statement sections. A man called 911 to file a missing person report. He stated that he dropped off his wife for an early morning jog and she had not returned by the afternoon. Investigators asked the husband to write down what happened. He could have focused his statement on his wife’s departure, her normal running route, and his frantic attempts to locate her. Instead, the husband concentrated on what happened before he discovered that his wife was missing. He wrote at length about arguments that the couple had in the days preceding his wife’s disappearance, resulting in the introduction containing 82 percent of the total words in his statement. An examination of the three sections of the statement revealed an extremely short criminal incident section compared with such a lengthy introduction. In fact, the description of the criminal incident (the discovery that his wife was missing) used only7 percent of the total words, with the conclusion accounting for the remaining 11 percent. The brevity of the criminal incident section indicated that the husband’s statement lacked critical information. For example, he failed to mention any search for his wife or any phone calls to her friends and relatives. His later admission of strangling his wife during an argument confirmed the lack of veracity in his statement.

Analysis of the 60 statements in the authors’ study revealed a positive statistical relationship

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Research Overview

The authors selected 60 statements written by suspects or victims during the investigation of violent crime and property crimes. They chose this number based on the knowledge that research results tend to stabilize after 30 observations. Therefore, they used 30 statements that investigators concluded were truthful and 30 that investigators found deceptive. The investigators determined veracity or deception through the conviction by a judge or jury, overwhelming physical case evidence, or corroborated confession by the offender. For many of the statements, all three conditions applied.

In choosing the 60 statements, the authors considered six selection factors: clear case resolutions, open-ended instructions, legibility, original language (not translated into English), redundancy by individual, and redundancy by incident. They used each selection factor to eliminate as many potential confounding factors as possible. Once they had selected the statements, they had them typed for computer-searching purposes.

between the percentage of words in the criminal incident section and veracity. The criminal incident section—the essence of the statement—directly answers the question, “What happened?” Statements with an unusually long introduction followed by a short criminal incident section inform investigators that the writers did not concentrate on the primary event, the criminal incident. Therefore, focused interviews with the writers of such unbalanced statements may help investigators uncover vital missing information concerning the crime.

Presence of Unique Sensory Details

A second relationship that the authors found between veracity and features of the examined statements involved the inclusion of unique sensory details. Such information recounted by a suspect or victim includes detailed depictions of the five sensory perceptions—sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch. In an assault case, for example, a truthful victim might describe the alcoholic smell of an assailant’s breath or the rough feel of his calloused hands. Unique, rather than generic, descriptions add to the specificity of the sensory details. The following excerpts from truthful statements illustrate unique sensory details in the five sensory categories:

- **Sight:** “I looked back and saw that the car was in total flames.”
- **Sound:** “I heard a very loud thud.”
- **Smell:** “I had to change her diaper ‘cause she smelled awful.”
- **Taste:** “It was so bitter that I couldn’t drink it.”
- **Touch:** “The window blew out, and I felt heat on my face.”

Studies contrasting truthful, experienced memories with false, or constructed, ones have shown that the experienced memories contain more sensory information. Similarly, in studies of oral statements, researchers have found that truthful accounts include more details than deceptive ones. When the authors examined sensory details in the 60 written statements, they also found a positive statistical relationship between the presence of sensory details and veracity. Overall, the truthful statements contained a specificity of sensory details not found in the deceptive ones.

In examining sensory details, investigators must consider whether an alleged victim or a
suspect provided the statement. One written by a falsely alleging victim may reveal a lack of sensory details because the person could not perceive any sensory data from a fictitious incident. A statement written by a deceptive suspect may disclose the same lack of sensory details, but for different reasons—either to avoid providing a truthful account that would implicate the writer or to refrain from supplying detailed false information that a competent investigator could refute. The location of the sensory details within statements also can provide clues to investigators. In the examined statements, the authors found a positive relationship with veracity and sensory details located within the criminal incident section of the statements, whereas no statistically significant relationship existed between veracity and sensory details in the introduction. In the criminal incident section of a bank robbery getaway driver’s truthful account, she described a dye pack exploding as the car left the bank, including sensory details of sight, sound, and touch.

I heard three pops (sound) and the car started to fill with red smoke (sight). I couldn’t see (sight) and was having a hard time breathing (touch). I started to cross over the yellow line (touch/sight), and he yelled at me to calm down (sound). I finally pulled over to the side (touch). When I opened the door, I fell out (touch) because I was choking and having a hard time breathing (touch).

Deceptive writers, as well as truthful ones, included sensory details in the introductions of the examined statements. The deceptive writers may have provided truthful information in this part of their statements. The sensory details may have represented accurate recall of events that preceded the criminal incident. An introduction filled with sensory details followed by a criminal incident section devoid of such details, however, should alert the investigator to scrutinize the statement. For example, a woman reporting an assault revealed a decreasing amount of sensory details. She described specific details about her actions before the assault occurred. But, she filled the criminal incident section with vagueness and equivocation, rather than with sensory details. She wrote “someone” instead of “a tall man wearing a black ski mask” and “sort of poked a weapon” instead of “jabbed the gun into my neck.” Suspects or alleged victims who include sensory details in the introduction but not in the criminal incident section should receive carefully planned follow-up questioning to explore why they omitted such critical details from the most important part of their statements.

The presence of sensory details indicates an increased likelihood that the detailed part of the statement is truthful. Other parts of the statement, however, may not be totally truthful. As an example, a young man admitted that he burned his car for insurance reasons. He provided the following written statement, which began with sensory details but ended with a vague, equivocal description and three examples of the negation word not:

I turned off the hard-top road, got out of the car and left it running (touch). I reached in and dropped it in gear, steering it over the hill (touch). The car went way over an embankment (sight). I walked down and shut the car off (touch). I removed the keys and soaked the whole car in gasoline (touch). I took a cigarette lighter and lit it (touch). I took off back up the steep hill (touch).
I caught a ride with someone (vague and equivocal) on the hard-top road, but I’m not sure (negation, lack of knowledge) who it was. I’m not sure (negation, lack of knowledge) where I went right after that, but I ended up at my house. I really don’t remember (negation, lack of memory) much more than what I’ve told you.

The detailed part of the statement gave a truthful account of a car arson. In the remainder of the statement, however, the owner omitted sensory details, such as the descriptions of the person who gave him a ride and the vehicle. He used equivocation and negation to avoid supplying a complete account of the arson. Further investigation revealed that a friend had followed the suspect to the arson site and provided the ride home.

**Inclusion of Emotions**

The final part of the research involved examining the relationship between veracity and the inclusion of emotions in the 60 written statements. An emotion is defined as a physiological change from homeostasis experienced in strong feelings, such as fear. Researchers have categorized emotions into eight main families: fear, anger, sadness, enjoyment, love, surprise, disgust, and shame. Each emotion family includes a range of similar emotions that evoke the same physiological responses. For example, fear emotions range from anxiety and apprehension to fright and terror.

Memory studies have revealed that the recall of experienced events includes more affective information, such as emotional reactions, than the recall of created events. In oral statements, researchers have found emotional experiences present in truthful witness accounts but not generally in constructed ones.

A victim of a quickly occurring traumatic event may not be aware of emotions until the trauma ends, when the emotions flood into consciousness. Such emotions, therefore, may appear in the conclusion of a statement. Truthful victims may include specific descriptions of fear, anger, embarrassment, or shock in their conclusions. Because emotions in the conclusion reveal the crime’s effect on the writer, the presence of emotions may provide a clue that the event actually was experienced, not fabricated. As an example, the bank robbery getaway driver wrote that she “was nervous and scared” and “heard a gun shot and jumped because it scared me.” The descriptions of fear in her written statement indicated that the incident described likely did happen.

In the authors’ study, the examination of emotions in the conclusions proved more informative than in either the introductions or the criminal incident sections. The conclusions of statements allow victims and suspects to react to what previously has happened. After truthfully describing being raped, a victim included this sentence in her conclusion: “I was hysterical and locked all the doors.” By noting any references to emotions in the conclusions, investigators may gain valuable insight to how crimes emotionally affect victims and suspects.

The inclusion of emotions in statements appeared to differ with the specific type of crime. When the authors examined all 60 statements, they found a weak positive relationship between veracity and emotions in the conclusion sections. They found the strongest and most significant relationship between veracity and emotions in the conclusions of homicide statements. Suspects and witnesses writing about murder incidents might be expected to be more emotionally involved than
those writing about crimes of a less serious nature because homicides involve loss of life of the victim and loss of freedom (or life) of the offender. A witness to a homicide wrote in his conclusion, "I was scared out of my mind."

Conclusion

Instead of relying solely on indicators of deception to discern truthful statements, investigators also can gain insight from indicators of veracity. Overall, the authors’ study of 60 written statements revealed three clues to veracity.

1) In truthful statements, the criminal incident section was typically the longest of the statement. This did not hold true for many of the deceptive statements examined, which had longer introductions.

2) Truthful statements included more unique sensory details than deceptive ones, particularly in the criminal incident sections.

3) In the conclusions of many truthful statements, writers described their emotions, especially in serious crimes, such as homicides.

Although these three dimensions only indicate the likelihood of veracity, the inclusion of unique sensory details and emotional reactions can alert investigators to the possibility of truthfulness in written accounts. The absence of sensory details, particularly in conjunction with a relatively short criminal incident section, can serve to identify areas of statements needing additional probing during interviews of suspects and alleged victims.

Statement analysis techniques provide insight to areas of veracity and deception within written statements. Statement analysis is not an end in itself, but only a means to an end; the end is the discovery of the truth.

Endnotes

2 Veracity is defined as information that can be verified as being accurate. In this article, the authors use the terms truthfulness and veracity interchangeably.
9 Ibid.
10 Supra note 5.
12 John Kaster, Interviewing Witnesses and Statement Analysis, 1999 (unpublished manuscript); and Avinoam Sapir, Scientific Content Analysis (Phoenix, AZ: Laboratory for Scientific Interrogation, 1987).

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