

# Self-disclosure and self-deprecating self-reference: Conversational practices of personalization in police interviews with children reporting alleged sexual offenses



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## Abstract

This article examines how police officers ostensibly reveal personal information about themselves in investigative interviews with children reporting their being victim of alleged sexual offenses. We identify two practices of personalization. First, we show how, during the opening phase of interviews, officers engage in clear, unambiguous self-disclosure and how these self-disclosures are designed to elicit expressions of affiliation from witnesses. Second, we identify instances of self-deprecating self-reference as in 'I'm going deaf that's all'. These self-references are delivered to manage trouble responsibility in environments of repair. We show how they manage the conflicting demands of rapport building and the requirement to make interviewees feel as if they are being listened to and understood, on the one hand, and the need for effective evidence gathering, on the other. The present study extends understanding of how officers personalize the investigative interview, as recommended by best practice guidelines.

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## 1. Introduction

Investigative interviewing of children who allege their being victims of sexual offenses can be a demanding task for both interviewer and interviewee. As outlined in best practice guidelines such as *Achieving Best Evidence in Criminal Proceedings: Guidance on Using Special Measures* (henceforth ABE), published by the Ministry of Justice in 2011, interviews with children in England and Wales are mandatorily video-recorded by the police and these recordings serve two main purposes. The first is the gathering of evidence for use in the investigation and in criminal proceedings; the second is the evidence in-chief of the witness; child witnesses under the age of eighteen will normally give their evidence outside of the courtroom by playing the video recorded interview as evidence in-chief. This enables children to undergo less rigorous questioning while in court, but places greater emphasis on the police interview to form a key aspect of the evidence in the investigation. In investigations that lack technical evidence, as occurs frequently in cases of alleged

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sexual offenses, the content of police interviews with suspects, witnesses and victims often completely decide the success of a given crime investigation (Holmberg, 2004). Such a central role means that it is vital that officers undertake appropriate measures when interviewing children to gain reliable and comprehensive accounts.

The present study examines how police officers ostensibly reveal personal information about themselves in investigative interviews with children reporting their being victim of alleged sexual offenses. We focus on two versions of the practice. First, we focus on cases of clear, unambiguous self-disclosure (e.g. “if it makes you feel any better to start off with I do feel a little bit nervous”). These self-disclosures take the form of assessments and build on and affiliate with interviewees’ prior assessments. As Clark et al. (2003) note, such assessments are a way of encouraging a further affiliative assessment from an interlocutor and are “a particularly important form of rapport as they comprise occurrences of these parties *showing* co-participation and social solidarity to one other” (p. 6). These self-disclosures are confined to opening phases of interviews, during which officers should be concerned with “personalizing the interview, building rapport and engaging the witness” (ABE, 2011, p. 187). We show how these self-disclosures are designed to build extended sequences of rapport, which may hinder evidence gathering in subsequent interview phases. Second, we outline instances of self-deprecating self-reference (henceforth SDSR) (e.g. “I’m going deaf that’s all”) as a practice for managing the conflicting demands of rapport building. On the one hand, establishing rapport involves appearing engaged, listening attentively and responding appropriately. A basic principle as outlined in ABE is to “listen to the witness” (p. 11). On the other hand, effective evidence gathering (where repeated and/or intensive questioning can often be undertaken) possesses the risk of giving the impression to the interviewee that either they are not being listened to, believed or understood. This is significant as Back et al. (2011) note that sexually abused children report the questioning by the police as a strange and unknown experience and when police, for example, call into question statements made about the abuse, children may feel that they are viewed as unreliable. Further, they may become “doubtful about their own narrative about the sexual abuse” (p. 53). It is imperative then, that intensive questioning is undertaken in such a way that children feel supported and understood. We show SDSR is a means of achieving this and managing the conflict between appearing engaged and listening attentively on the one hand, and engaging in repeated and/or intensive questioning for the purposes of effective evidence gathering, on the other.

Relatedly, conversation analytic research has shown that practices of other-initiation of repair (henceforth OIR) are vulnerable to communicating the stance that responsibility for the trouble lies with the speaker whose talk inspired the repair initiation (Robinson, 2006). That is, that fault lies with the interviewee, such as problems with their speaking. We show how SDSR is a specific type of self-disclosure with specific implications for matters of rapport, particularly in environments of repair. They are routinely delivered as an account as interviewers manage responsibility for repair related trouble by claiming this to be a matter of their own impairment. Further, we show how this practice may be used by officers to “personalize the interview” (ABE, 2011, p. 187) outside of the opening phase. This is significant as guidelines stress that “rapport should not be regarded as something that is confined to the first phase of the interview” (ABE, p. 188).

### 1.1. Interactional studies of self-disclosure

Work within conversation analysis has documented practices of self-disclosure. Antaki et al. (2005) show how, in everyday talk, speakers design their talk to come off as disclosive. They argue that revelations of personal information in and of themselves are insufficient as “no list of topics can hope to capture what comes off as a self-disclosure” (p. 186). They outline several features that work together for something to be heard as a self-disclosure; first, talk must be designed to be heard as a report of personal information rather than some other conversational move (this may be achieved, for example, through features such as news-casting). Second, the report must be designed to be heard as significant or newsworthy in the circumstances (for example by describing experiences in exaggerated terms such as ‘I’m the world’s worst cook’). Finally, the report must be designed to be heard as over and above what is required by the interactional business at hand (for example, using turn initial particles such as ‘as a matter of fact’). This work has implications for research on self-disclosure as “if psychologists want to assess it, it would be better if they first had the means of recognizing it, and what it does in interaction” (p. 183).

Research within various institutional settings has revealed how self-disclosure may have clear institutional functions. For example, Leudar et al. (2006) discuss psychotherapists’ disclosures of personal information to their clients during therapeutic sessions. They show how therapists’ disclosures are designed as experiential matches (Heritage and Lindström, 1998) that match an element of the client’s talk. They function to normalize or mitigate the client’s expressed problematic experiences. Stokoe (2009) documented practices of self-reference in police interviews with suspects, examining how, when and for what interactional purposes officers disclose personal information. These rare instances of self-reference have clear functions such as to affiliate with suspects or to pursue an admission or confession. Rather than being organized randomly, interviewers’ self-references have clear interactional functions within suspect interviews. The present study develops this work and considers police officer’s uses of SDSR in police interviews with child witnesses.

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