

Talking rape: Operation Soteria and the police interview

Project applying discourse analysis to evaluate the effects of Operation Soteria on interviews with rape and serious sexual offence (RASSO) victim-survivors.

Key details

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Police region	West Midlands
Level of research	Professional/work based
Project start date	September 2025
Date due for completion	August 2026

Research context

This unique project aims to offer strategic support by providing analysis to alleviate an important gap in police treatment of rape. Using discourse analytical methods it will help ensure that a key area of concern, the handling of investigative interviews, the most crucial link in the chain leading to prosecution, is effectively addressed. As of 2024 a staggering 97.4% of reported rapes in England and Wales do not result in a prosecution (Home Office, 2024). Police treatment of rape and serious sexual offences (RASSO), long identified as deeply flawed, is experiencing a seismic period of change since the need for a major overhaul was recognised in 2021 by the UK government's 'end-

to-end rape review'.

This prompted the 'pioneering' Operation Soteria Bluestone (OSB). Following a pilot conducted at Avon and Somerset Constabulary (ASC), OSB involved deep-dives of policing practice by a team of academics, resulting in the 2023 implementation of a National Operating Model for investigating RASSO. Surprisingly, however, OSB's first report (Stanko, 2023) makes minimal mention of investigative interviews as a site where changes would be enacted, and there are no specific recommendations for interview practice. Interviews are often the only evidence available to the court at a subsequent trial, yet they remain fraught with problems.

Interviewers' language has serious consequences for survivors' experiences of the legal process, yet specialist guidance to date has had limited input from the well-established discipline of forensic linguistics. There is thus a pressing need for linguistically-informed interview evaluation. Linguistics can address different questions to the disciplines currently represented on the OSB team (for example, psychology and criminology). Linguistic research has repeatedly shown that interviewers' priorities and communicative patterns are not necessarily the most conducive for obtaining high-quality evidence nor for survivors' experiences (see for example, MacLeod, 2020).

Research methodology

This project will draw on two datasets:

Set one

Set one will comprise ten video-recorded interviews with people reporting RASSO prior to the force's piloting of OSB in June 2021.

Set two

Set two will be ten video-recorded interviews conducted after the roll out of the National Operating Model in July 2023.

Analytical approach

After Jeffersonian transcription the analytical method adopted in this project will be a 'toolkit' approach to analysing discourse, drawing on Conversation Analysis (CA), discursive psychology

and interactional sociolinguistics to examine the discursive patterns within the interviews.

All these are wholly qualitative approaches, where discourse is viewed as a practice in its own right rather than as a 'mirroring' of some internal cognitive reality. The discursive approach thus provides a perfect complement to the focus on memory and communication typical of cognitive and social psychologists working in this area. Based on previous research we will focus on formulation, topic control, reported speech and participation frameworks, with additional objects of analysis emerging as the analysis progresses.

Discourse analysis has a proven record of bearing fruit in this context. From Rock's (2001) seminal investigation into the discursive negotiation involved in the production of witness statements, and including Heydon's (2005) exploration of the differing interactional strategies adopted in different types of interview, these approaches have provided unparalleled insight into these interactions. Previous work has found evidence of victim-blaming by interviewers (for example, Antaki and others, 2015) leading to survivors often accounting for their own culpability (MacLeod, 2016), and also shown how, in the quest for neutrality, opportunities for rapport are neglected (for example, Jol and Stommel, 2010).

References

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