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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Building Rapport in Interviews with Adolescent Trafficking Victims

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Abstract

Though much is known about children's sexual abuse disclosure, less attention has been directed towards disclosure in other types of youthful victims, especially those who may be reluctant to tell due to either normative development or victims' specific experiences. Trafficked youth, particularly those who are adolescents, represent one such group. Understanding how suspected youth trafficking victims are questioned by authorities, especially with respect to establishing rapport and trust, is important for informing professionals how to effectively question this unique population of victims to overcome their reluctance. We examined transcripts of interviews conducted by federal interviewers ($n = 12,653$ question-answer turns across 33 interviews) and police ($n = 4,972$ question-answer turns across 14 interviews) with trafficked youth between the ages of 12 and 18. Interviews were reliably coded for the length of pre-substantive questioning, provision of instructions and ground rules, and use of rapport building and supportive strategies. Federal interviewers used pre-substantive instructions and built rapport with potential victims more often than police did. Also, and although infrequently used overall, supportive interviewing strategies were evident more often by federal interviewers than police. Results provide much-needed knowledge about how law enforcement investigators interview and elicit disclosures from vulnerable populations of adolescent victims.

KEYWORDS

adolescent victims, investigative interviewing, rapport building, sex trafficking, supportive interviewing

Key Practitioner Messages

- Adolescent trafficking victims are often reluctant to disclose information about their experiences, and strategic approaches to build rapport may facilitate their disclosure.
- Despite recognising the value of rapport building, professionals, especially police, may only rarely use these strategies when interviewing suspected adolescent trafficking victims.
- Although federal and police interviewers often only minimally prepare youth for substantive questioning, federal interviewers tend to do so slightly more frequently by giving instructions, building rapport, and offering support more often, all strategies that could enhance later disclosures.

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INTRODUCTION

Although commercial sexual exploitation, or sex trafficking, affects thousands of minor victims in the United States each year, prosecution of perpetrators remains difficult (Lavoie et al., 2019), often as a result of victims' lack of disclosures (Farrell et al., 2019). That is, rather than victims coming forward and disclosing, trafficking victims tend to be identified by law enforcement indirectly, often through the course of other investigations (Farrell et al., 2019), sting operations or suspected criminal activity by the victims (Halter, 2010; Love et al., 2018; Quas et al., 2023). Negative encounters with the authorities, combined with victims' trauma histories and relationship to their trafficker all increase their reluctance to disclose their experiences to authorities (e.g. Crisma et al., 2004; Katz, 2013), leading victims instead to be evasive and uncooperative. As a result, it can be extremely difficult to identify victims, collect key evidence necessary to prosecute perpetrators and provide much-needed services.

Given victims' high levels of reluctance, it is of considerable interest to ascertain precisely how they are questioned, particularly with respect to whether questioning includes strategies that could be effective at overcoming victims' reluctance and increasing their complete disclosure. Rapport building early in the interview represents one such strategy. Rapport building has been emphasised as an important part of best practice for questioning both children (Lamb et al., 2007) and adults (Vallano et al., 2015; Walsh & Bull, 2012), spanning diverse populations of victims, witnesses and, with adults, even suspects in order to elicit true disclosures of negative experiences, trauma and criminal activity, and to improve the overall amount of details reported. What is virtually unknown, however, is whether rapport building is used in forensic interviews with suspected trafficking victims, given their potentially high levels of evasiveness and unresponsiveness, and if so, whether victims provide detailed accounts in response. The overarching goal of the present study was to begin to address this gap, specifically by examining whether rapport building strategies occur in interviews with trafficked adolescents, and if so, whether their occurrence varies across different types of interviews. To pursue this goal, we examined forensic interviews with trafficked youth conducted by federal interviewers and police. Of interest was the interviewers' provision of ground rules and instructions, as well as their use of rapport building and other supportive interviewing tactics.

VICTIM RELUCTANCE

When questioned by law enforcement, many trafficking victims are reluctant to disclose and provide complete and accurate reports. There are myriad reasons for this. For one, most trafficking victims in the US are adolescent-age by the time they are identified by the authorities (International Organization for Migration, 2018). Adolescents, more so than children, are cognisant of the consequences of disclosing harm and wrongdoing for themselves and others (Lemaigre et al., 2017). Adolescents also increasingly desire autonomy and take responsibility for a wider range of experiences, including possibly those outside of their actual control, potentially leading to an unwillingness to disclose those experiences, especially to adults. Second, trafficking victims' prior experiences may also have led to multiple encounters with law enforcement, including because of suspected engagement in delinquency or crime (Wilson & Dalton, 2008) or prostitution (Farrell et al., 2010). As a result, victims may be interrogated as suspects and possibly detained, with knowledge of their trafficking emerging only later (Halter, 2010; Love et al., 2018), meaning that, unlike victims of sexual abuse, who tend to come to the attention of authorities because they voluntarily disclosed abuse, the trafficking victims have often been questioned against their will, and are thus unlikely to be initially cooperative (Quas et al., 2023).

Law enforcement investigators are aware of the challenges they face when attempting to elicit disclosures and victimisation details from the victims. For example, Dianiska et al. (2023) found that federal and state/local law enforcement investigators rated victims' distrust of authorities and evasiveness as the two most frequent challenges encountered when interviewing suspected minor trafficking victims. At the same time, some federal and state/local law enforcement have ideas regarding how challenges might be overcome. Luna et al. (2023), for instance, reported that law enforcement, especially federal investigators, endorsed the use of victim-focused techniques (e.g. providing a warm, supportive environment and establishing ground rules) rather than suspect-focused techniques (e.g. stressing the seriousness of the crime in general when questioning suspected trafficking victims). Moreover, when asked directly how to overcome reporting challenges in interviews, more than half of investigators surveyed endorsed the use of building rapport to establish a relationship and facilitate trust and cooperation in victims (Dianiska et al., 2023).

RAPPORT BUILDING STRATEGIES

Law enforcement's recognition of the importance of rapport building is consistent with larger bodies of work on effective interviewing of other vulnerable populations (Ahern et al., 2017; Dianiska et al., 2023; Vallano et al., 2015). Yet,

simply endorsing rapport building says very little about the precise methods that are or should be used to actually build rapport. Multiple different techniques have been employed and recommended, with these often varying depending on the age of the interviewee.

With children, recommended rapport building techniques include explaining ground rules and discussing things the child likes to do, the latter with the use of open-ended questions to increase children's comfort narrating and help them practise doing so (Lamb et al., 2018; Lyon, 2014; Saywitz et al., 2015). Ground rules include asking children to say 'I don't know' or 'I don't remember' rather than guessing, and telling children to correct an interviewer who says something wrong. Interviewers may also explain their role and the purpose of the interview (Orbach et al., 2000), discuss the importance of honesty and ask the child to promise to tell the truth (Lyon et al., 2008), and provide children with concrete and clear instruction about the interviewer's knowledge and setting expectations for the interview. At times, rapport building is also included as an element in a constellation of interviewer behaviours that are collectively referred to as *supportive interviewing* that spans the entirety of the interview (Bottoms et al., 2007; Quas & Lench, 2007; for reviews, see Saywitz et al., 2019). In addition to rapport building, supportive interviewing includes a range of verbal and non-verbal behaviours employed by an interviewer, such as maintaining an open body posture, engaging in active listening and backchannelling, providing noncontingent positive reinforcement of the child's effort during the entire interview, and acknowledging and exploring the child's emotions throughout. Given the potential overlap and co-occurrence of rapport tactics and other supportive behaviours, it is useful to distinguish them when possible.

With adults, rapport building tends to emphasise the interpersonal relationship between the interviewer and the interviewee. Specifically, interviewers are encouraged to provide explanations about the interview process and reasons for the interview, to ask background questions (with no guidance on how these should be phrased), to show an interest in the interviewee as a person and, in some instances, to provide information about themselves as well (Gabbert et al., 2020; Walsh & Bull, 2012). For instance, by eliciting personal background information from the interviewee, interviewers are not only able to establish a positive relationship with the interviewee (Collins & Miller, 1994), but also to identify opportunities to highlight similarities and find common ground (Dianiska et al., 2023).

On the one hand, which of the aforementioned techniques interviewers believe would be useful when questioning trafficking victims is of interest to ascertain, given that most interviewers, when asked about overcoming challenges, simply state 'rapport building' is important, without explaining specifically how rapport should be built. On the other hand, even more important than the techniques interviewers endorse via surveys are the techniques interviewers actually use. That is, surveys only provide insight into what law enforcement investigators believe they do or what they think is important. Surveys say little about investigators' actual questioning behaviour, including with respect to rapport. To determine the latter, it is necessary to document what occurs during forensic interviews with suspected victims. We had the unique opportunity to do just that, specifically by analysing interviews conducted by two groups of investigators: federal and local law enforcement. We further compared the groups' use of rapport strategies, an important comparison for several reasons.

Federal forensic interview specialists are often brought in to facilitate information-gathering and to collect details and statements that can be used to make determinations about and potentially prosecute cases in federal court. These specialists endorse a victim-oriented approach to their questioning, typically having received training in the conduct of trauma-informed forensic interviews that empower victims to disclose and reduce retraumatisation during the interview process. State and local police tend to encounter victims first, often while victims are engaging in or believed to be involved in crime (e.g. prostitution). Local police may also lack training in questioning victims and in trauma-informed practices. Rather, training for law enforcement has been largely dominated by a focus on suspect interrogation, often via the use of accusatorial high pressure interrogative approaches (Inbau et al., 2013; Kassin et al., 2007), most often typified by two primary tactics, minimisation and maximisation. Though both confession-oriented, minimisation is a gentler and at times indirect technique, during which an interviewer might offer justifications or excuses to lessen the perceived seriousness of an offence, whereas maximisation relies on harsher intimidation tactics to elicit a confession (Kassin & McNall, 1991). Some police interviews with sexually exploited adolescents show that, not only are police using minimisation and maximisation, but they are pairing these with rapport and support, leading some victims to be high in reluctance (Nogalska et al., 2021). Rapport and support in this context may be perceived as disingenuous because they co-occur with manipulative interrogative practices (see e.g. Kelly et al., 2016). Therefore, while federal forensic interview specialists may operate like consultants and adopt a victim-centred, information-gathering approach to interviews, local law enforcements' training and experiences may lead them to interrogate victims more like suspects.

THE PRESENT STUDY

The overarching goal of our investigation was to document the rapport tactics employed by two types of law enforcement investigators: forensic interview specialists from a federal agency, and police interviewers from several state precincts. By identifying specific techniques, and by comparing the two groups of law enforcement, we were able to gain

novel and much-needed insight into a wide range of interviewing strategies used in practice with this vulnerable and unique population. In the interviews, we coded question-answer turns (i.e., interviewer question, interviewee answer), both before and after the shift to the substantive portion of the interview, for whether the interviewer provided instructions, built rapport, or more generally offered support. We tentatively expected that the federal interviewers, who received specialised training on appropriate victim-centred interviewing techniques, would use these tactics more so than police interviewers, who are trained in interrogative tactics for use with criminal suspects (Cleary & Warner, 2016; Kelly & Meissner, 2015; Kozinski, 2017) and who commonly encounter and question trafficking victims as suspects of delinquency or crime, including prostitution (Farrell et al., 2017).

METHOD

Transcripts

We obtained transcripts from collaborators at federal and local agencies, as well as via the California Public Records Act (California Government Code 6250, 2021). Federal interviews were conducted by forensic interview specialists and transcribed verbatim from video recordings. Local law enforcement interviews were conducted by police in California. Transcripts of these interviews were obtained through public records requests for trial transcripts of criminal cases involving charges of pimping and pandering of a minor filed under sections 236 and 266 of the California Penal Code (i.e., human trafficking, pimping/soliciting of a minor). We identified, within this larger sample (all of which had been successfully prosecuted), cases in which law enforcement interview transcripts were included in the trial transcripts as evidence. All transcripts were reformatted into question-answer turns via Microsoft Excel for coding and analysis. During this process, transcripts were anonymised to remove minors' names and other potentially identifying information (e.g. name of apartment buildings or schools).

In total, our sample included 33 interviews with minor victims conducted by federal interviewers and 14 conducted by police. These were further broken into $n = 12,659$ question-answer turns across the 33 federal interviews and $n = 4,972$ question-answer turns across the 14 police interviews. The transcripts involved a total of 47 unique minor victims of sex trafficking, all of whom were between the ages of 12 and 18 at the time of victimisation.

Descriptively, most interviews were conducted by a single interviewer (77%, 36 of 47 interviews) although a small proportion had two (most often) or more interviewers present (15%), with most interviewers (70%) being female. At the other extreme, one victim spoke with and was questioned by seven interviewers during a single interview. At the time of the interview, victims were, on average, 16 years of age ($M = 15.93$, $SD = 3.26$, range = 12–34). Nearly all victims were female (96%). Though our sample was focused on victims who were adolescents at the time of the exploitation, two were adults (one aged 19 years, police sample; one aged 34 years, federal sample) at the time of the interview. Because these interviews presented the same patterns as the others, and all interviewees were discussing victimisation as adolescents, we kept the interviews in our final dataset. Removing them did not change any of the findings.

Development and implementation of coding

We developed a novel coding scheme that captures rapport building techniques often used in interviews with both children and adults (Ahern et al., 2017; Lamb et al., 2018; Walsh & Bull, 2012). The coding scheme distinguishes between three categories of techniques: those that (a) provide instructions and explanations [I, *instructions*]; (b) establish and maintain the interpersonal relationship between the interviewer and interviewee [R, *rapport*]; and (c) offer support when discussing difficult topics, like abuse and exploitation [S; *support*] (see Table 1 for definitions and examples). Each category was coded for up to two techniques used in a single question-answer turn (e.g. 'Q: You have a girlfriend, thanks for letting me know that [R: *interviewer gratitude and honesty*]. And so how long have you been dating her? [R: *eliciting background information*]' contains two rapport techniques).

Interview *instructions* included the following tactics: the interviewer reviewing ground rules, discussing honesty, and explaining the interview process or interviewers' motives. *Rapport* building included such tactics as the interviewer's pleasantries and greetings, elicitation of personal background information from the interviewee, showing interest, expressions of gratitude and honesty, expressions of interviewer humility, asking for open-ended narratives (at the outset and when redirecting the topic to trafficking) and demonstrations of active listening via cued invitations. Finally, *support* was examined separately from rapport and was coded for three tactics: when the interviewer offered emotional support, provided positive reinforcement or encouragement or allowed victim discretion. Two independent raters coded 50% of the sample to establish reliability, and one coder completed the data set. Inter-rater reliability was high (PABAK >0.94). All discrepancies were discussed and resolved with 100% agreement.

TABLE 1 Definitions of instructions, rapport and support technique codes.

Utterance type	Definition	Example(s)
Instructions	Lamb et al., 2018; Lyon, 2014; Lyon et al., 2014	
Ground rules		
Do not know	Statement that the child should say ‘I do not know’ when they cannot remember information or do not know the answer, rather than guess.	Q: ‘If there’s a question that you do not know the answer to, it’s okay to say “I do not know.” Okay?’
Do not understand	Statement that child should ask for clarification/say they do not understand something (a word, an entire question).	Q: ‘If I ask you a question that you do not understand, do you promise to tell me that you do not understand the question so that I can ask it a different way?’
You’re wrong	Statement that child should correct any mistakes that the interviewer makes.	Q: ‘If I say something wrong, it’s okay to correct me. Okay?’
Ignorant interviewer	Statement that the interviewer does not share their knowledge/is naïve to what occurred.	Q: ‘Alright second rule, so I know a very little bit about the situation. I really do not know all that much.’
Truth/Lie Discussion	(Lyon et al., 2008)	
Truth/Lie discussion	Discussion, explanation and/or practice of truths and lies. Includes eliciting a promise to tell the truth.	Q: ‘If I were to tell you I’m wearing a green suit with purple tie, would that be a truth or a lie?’
Explanations	Lamb et al., 2018; Orbach et al., 2000; Walsh & Bull, 2012	
Explaining motives and reasoning	Statements informing the child why they are being asked a question or asked to do something.	Q: ‘I’m going to stop you right there. I have to break it up so we have a full understanding.’
Explaining roles and procedures	Statements explaining the roles, procedures or process of what will happen next with the court proceedings.	Q: ‘So, questions that I’m going to ask you are going to be about the modeling done with Jason and then some of the things that happened.’
Rapport	Gabbert et al., 2020; Lamb et al., 2018; Saywitz et al., 2015; Walsh & Bull, 2012	
Pleasantries and greetings	Pleasantry, introduction, addressing child by name, greeting in a friendly manner, gesture of good will	Q: ‘Good morning, John Doe. Did you have a nice weekend?’
Personal background	Asking about child’s background information or personal experiences (likes and dislikes, finding common ground, interviewer self-disclosing information to child).	Q: ‘Do you like building things?’
Interviewer honesty and gratitude	Interviewer states they are being honest with child or thanks child for their cooperation or statement/disclosure	Q: ‘I think that is about it, John Doe. Thank you for coming in.’
Acknowledging errors and humility	Interviewer admitting to their mistakes or faults, using self-deprecation or humility, seeking to clarify their understanding	Q: ‘You do not have to say “sir.” Makes me feel older.’
Eliciting an initial narrative	Interviewer explicitly asks for an initial, open narrative about the event that transpired	Q: ‘Tell me about the reason you came here today.’
Circling back open-ended narrative	Interviewer redirects the interview back to the substantive topic after a tangent, shows interest and attention	Returning to topic: Q: ‘So tell me like, tell me more about everything that [NAME REDACTED] said about the money.’
Cued invitations	Interviewer uses previously mentioned information as cues for elaboration. Explicit reminder of previous statement paired with prompt to elaborate.	Q: ‘I know when you said that you first met [NAME REDACTED], he had given you some money to buy some clothes. Tell me about that.’
Support	Lamb et al., 2018; Saywitz et al., 2019	
Exploring emotions	Acknowledging, echoing or exploring a child’s expressed or unexpressed emotions	Q: ‘It’s scary and embarrassing, right?’
Positive reinforcement, reassurance	Reinforcing the child’s effort during their testimony and reassuring the child	Q: ‘I know this is embarrassing, but you are doing good.’
Victim discretion	Emphasising that the child has control, asking permission before moving forward	Q: ‘Is it okay if I ask you a few questions about that?’

RESULTS

Our analyses are presented as follows. We first compared the length of interviews conducted by federal and police investigators, and the proportion of time spent preparing minor victims for substantive questioning. Second, we analysed the frequency of tactics used at both the interview-level and at the question-answer-turn-level. For each tactic, we examined differences in the proportion of interviews that contained a given tactic, and then differences in the number of question-answer turns that included that tactic. Analyses consisted primarily of Pearson χ^2 tests and t -tests.

Interview length

Interviews ($N = 47$) included, on average, 384 question-answer turns ($M = 384.36$, $SD = 191.07$; range = 122–1007). The pre-substantive phase on average included 62 question-answer turns ($M = 61.88$, $SD = 29.50$, range = 7–128). In our sample, federal interviews ($N = 33$; $M = 384.36$ turns, $SD = 191.07$) were similar in length to police interviews ($N = 14$; $M = 355.57$ turns, $SD = 311.29$) overall, $t(45) = 0.39$, $p = 0.70$, $d = 0.12$. However, the distribution of time in the interviews diverged between the two types of professionals. Federal interviewers spent proportionally more time engaging in pre-substantive questioning ($M = 8\%$ of turns per interview) prior to moving on to a substantive topic than did police ($M = 4\%$ of turns per interview), $t(45) = 5.63$, $p < 0.001$, $d = 1.80$.

Pre-substantive use of instructions

We first examined the use of instructions in the pre-substantive phase. Because instructions provide context and, essentially, training on what to expect from the subsequent interview, we only looked at instructions provided prior to moving on to the substantive topic.

During the pre-substantive phase, 92% of interviews (specifically, 19% of interviewer turns) involved the use of some instruction tactic. Federal interviewers always provided instructions (100% of federal interviews; 20% pre-substantive turns). Police interviewers also did so frequently, but not quite as often (71% of police interviews; 15% pre-substantive-turns). These differences were significant at both the interview-level [$\chi^2(1) = 10.31$, $p < 0.01$, Cramer's $V = 0.47$] and the turn-level [$\chi^2(1) = 4.32$, $p = 0.04$, Cramer's $V = 0.09$]. When interviewers' use of specific techniques was examined, several important differences emerged (see Table 1). Federal interviewers were more likely to discuss ground rules [interview-level $\chi^2(1) = 29.82$, $p < 0.01$, Cramer's $V = 0.80$; turn-level $\chi^2(1) = 8.13$, $p < 0.01$, Cramer's $V = 0.06$], and provide explanations of the interviewers' motivations [interview-level $\chi^2(1) = 19.98$, $p < 0.01$, Cramer's $V = 0.65$; turn-level $\chi^2(1) = 5.29$, $p = 0.02$, Cramer's $V = 0.05$] and the roles of those involved in the interview [interview-level $\chi^2(1) = 12.30$, $p < 0.01$, Cramer's $V = 0.51$]. In contrast, even though a greater proportion of federal interviews contained a discussion of truths and lies [interview-level $\chi^2(1) = 8.66$, $p < 0.01$, Cramer's $V = 0.43$], at the level of turns, police interviewers more frequently discussed honesty and the importance of the truth with minor victims [turn-level $\chi^2(1) = 10.07$, $p < 0.01$, Cramer's $V = 0.07$].

Use of rapport and support across the interview

A key topic of interest in the current investigation concerned how often rapport tactics were used during the interviews, including in relation to how often support tactics were used. Moreover, rapport building and also support are believed to be important not only in the beginning or pre-substantive phase, but also throughout an interview as a way of maintaining a positive interaction (Walsh & Bull, 2012). Thus, we analysed the categories throughout the entire interview, rather than only in the substantive phase. Both rapport and support were evident, although their frequency varied considerably.

First, regarding rapport, all interviews (100% of federal, and 100% of police) contained a rapport tactic. When we tested for differences in rapport tactic use at the turn-level, several important trends emerged. Overall, across the entirety of the interview, both federal and police interviewers spent a substantial amount of time (18% of all turns) building rapport with potential victims. However, federal interviewers did so (21% of turns) more often than did police (8% of turns) [$\chi^2(1) = 430.22$, $p < 0.01$, Cramer's $V = 0.16$]. Differences in the specific techniques used between the two types of law enforcement are presented in Table 2. As is evident, federal interviewers were more likely than police interviewers to build rapport by: offering introductions and greetings [turn-level $\chi^2(1) = 3.99$, $p = 0.05$, Cramer's $V = 0.02$]; asking about the interviewee's background and personal history [interview-level $\chi^2(1) = 4.92$, $p = 0.03$, Cramer's $V = 0.32$; turn-level $\chi^2(1) = 203.66$, $p < 0.01$, Cramer's $V = 0.11$]; acknowledging their own errors and

TABLE 2 Interview length and technique use across interviews.

	Federal interviews	State/local interviews	All interviews	χ^2	<i>p</i>
Total turns	12,653	4,972	17,625		
Pre-substantive turns	2,119	293	2,412		
Substantive turns	10,083	4,581	14,664		
Closing turns	451	98	549		
Instructions (any)	33 interviews (100%)* 427 turns (20%)*	10 interviews (71%) 44 turns (15%)	43 interviews (92%) 471 turns (20%)	10.31 4.32	<0.01 0.04
Ground rules (any)	31 interviews (94%)* 141 turns (6.7%)*	2 interviews (14%) 7 turns (2.4%)	33 interviews (70%) 148 turns (6.1%)	29.82 8.13	<0.01 <0.01
Do not know	29 interviews (88%)* 45 turns (2.1%)	1 interview (7%) 3 turns (1%)	30 interviews (64%) 48 turns (2%)	27.75	<0.01
Do not understand	20 interviews (61%)* 38 turns (1.8%)	1 interview (7%) 1 turn (0.3%)	21 interviews (45%) 39 turns (1.6%)	11.38	<0.01
You're wrong	27 interviews (82%)* 37 turns (1.7%)	1 interview (7%) 3 turns (1%)	28 interviews (60%) 40 turns (1.7%)	22.76	<0.01
Ignorant interviewer	6 interviews (18%) 7 turns (0.3%)	0 interviews (0%) 0 turns (0%)	6 interviews (13%) 7 turns (0.3%)	2.92	0.09
Truth/lie discussion	28 interviews (85%)* 62 turns (2.9%)	6 interviews (43%) 19 turns (6.5%)*	34 interviews (72%) 81 turns (3.4%)	8.66 10.05	<0.01 <0.01
Explaining motives	29 interviews (88%)* 64 turns (3.0%)*	3 interviews (21%) 2 turns (0.7%)	32 interviews (68%) 66 turns (2.7%)	19.98 5.29	<0.01 0.02
Explaining roles	32 interviews (97%)* 96 turns (4.5%)	8 interviews (57%) 13 turns (4.4%)	40 interviews (85%) 109 turns (4.5%)	12.30 0.01	<0.01 0.94
Rapport (any)	33 interviews (100%) 2711 turns (21%)*	14 interviews (100%) 406 turns (8.2%)	47 interviews (100%) 3117 turns (18%)	-- 430.22	-- <0.01
Pleasantries and greetings	32 interviews (97%) 242 turns (1.9%)*	13 interviews (93%) 73 turns (1.5%)	45 interviews (96%) 315 turns (1.8%)	0.41 3.99	0.52 0.05
Personal background	33 interviews (100%)* 1481 turns (12%)*	12 interviews (86%) 230 turns (4.6%)	45 interviews (96%) 1,711 turns (9.7%)	4.92 203.66	0.03 <0.01
Interviewer honesty and gratitude	29 interviews (88%) 99 turns (0.8%)	12 interviews (86%) 28 turns (0.6%)	41 interviews (87%) 127 turns (0.7%)	0.04 2.39	0.84 0.12
Interviewer humility	30 interviews (91%)* 233 turns (1.8%)*	8 interviews (57%) 43 turns (0.9%)	38 interviews (81%) 276 turns (1.6%)	7.24 22.04	0.01 <0.01
Initial open-ended narrative	26 interviews (79%)* 36 turns (0.3%)	6 interviews (43%) 8 turns (0.2%)	32 interviews (68%) 44 turns (0.2%)	5.84 2.18	0.02 0.14
Circle back open-ended narrative	32 interviews (97%)* 422 turns (3.3%)*	9 interviews (64%) 19 turns (0.4%)	41 interviews (87%) 441 turns (2.5%)	9.43 127.47	<0.01 <0.01
Cued invitation	26 interviews (79%)* 230 turns (1.8%)*	1 interview (7%) 8 turns (0.2%)	27 interviews (57%) 238 turns (1.3%)	20.64 73.49	<0.01 <0.01
Support (any)	33 interviews (100%)* 542 turns (4.3%)*	12 interviews (86%) 105 turns (2.1%)	45 interviews (96%) 647 turns (3.7%)	4.92 47.50	0.03 <0.01
Exploring emotions	25 interviews (76%) 101 turns (0.8%)	8 interviews (57%) 39 turns (0.8%)	33 interviews (70%) 140 turns (0.8%)	1.63 0.01	0.20 0.93
Reassurance and positive reinforcement	32 interviews (97%)* 303 turns (2.4%)*	9 interviews (64%) 47 turns (0.9%)	41 interviews (87%) 350 turns (2.0%)	9.43 38.46	<0.01 <0.01
Victim discretion and control	20 interviews (61%) 145 turns (1.1%)*	5 interviews (36%) 25 turns (0.5%)	25 interviews (53%) 170 turns (1.0%)	2.45 15.43	0.12 <0.01

Note: Asterisks reflect significant differences between federal and state/local interviewers in technique use at the interview-level or turn-level. Percentages for instructions reflect only the percent of pre-substantive turns with tactic included. Percentages for rapport and support reflect all turns across the interview.

displaying humility [interview-level $\chi^2(1) = 7.24, p = 0.01$, Cramer's $V = 0.39$; turn-level $\chi^2(1) = 22.04, p < 0.01$, Cramer's $V = 0.04$]; asking for an initial open-ended narrative from victims [interview-level $\chi^2(1) = 5.84, p = 0.016$, Cramer's $V = 0.35$] as well as subsequent open-ended narratives circling back to the topic of trafficking [interview-level $\chi^2(1) = 9.43, p = 0.002$, Cramer's $V = 0.45$; turn-level $\chi^2(1) = 127.47, p < 0.001$, Cramer's $V = 0.09$], and asking cued invitations [interview-level $\chi^2(1) = 20.64, p < 0.001$, Cramer's $V = 0.66$; turn-level $\chi^2(1) = 73.49, p < 0.001$, Cramer's $V = 0.07$].

Second, nearly all interviews (96%) also included at least one supportive tactic (separate from rapport), although the actual frequency of support was extremely low, with only 4% of all turns including a supportive interviewing tactic. Federal interviewers were more likely to use a supportive technique at some point (100% of interviews; 4% of turns) than were police interviewers (86% of interviews; 2% of turns). These differences were significant at both the interview-level [$\chi^2(1) = 4.92, p = 0.03$, Cramer's $V = 0.32$] and turn-level [$\chi^2(1) = 47.50, p < 0.01$, Cramer's $V = 0.05$]. Federal interviewers were more likely to use positive reinforcement and reassurance [interview-level $\chi^2(1) = 9.43, p < 0.01$, Cramer's $V = 0.45$; turn-level $\chi^2(1) = 38.46, p < 0.01$, Cramer's $V = 0.05$], and give the victim control and discretion with what to disclose [turn-level $\chi^2(1) = 15.43, p < 0.01$, Cramer's $V = 0.03$], see Table 2.

DISCUSSION

Interviewers frequently encounter challenges and reluctance when questioning trafficking victims. Rapport building and support may help overcome reluctance and facilitate victims' disclosure. Yet, how often rapport building is actually employed and what it looks like in interviews with minor victims of trafficking has not, until the present study, been systematically documented. We developed a reliable coding scheme to capture the occurrences of rapport building techniques, but also related techniques involving instruction and support. We identified likely techniques based on those used in forensic interviews with children and adults and coded for their occurrence in interviews with suspected minor trafficking victims. We then compared these occurrences between interviews conducted by federal and police interviewers. Our findings offer important new insight regarding what techniques are most used with this unique population, a crucial first step relevant to understanding what techniques are likely to be most effective. Three important findings emerged from this work.

First, both federal interviewers and the police made minimal attempts to build rapport with trafficked youth. When present, these tactics included instructions at the outset and rapport building throughout, techniques known to increase reporting in vulnerable populations (Gabbert et al., 2020; Lavoie et al., 2021; Saywitz et al., 2019; Vallano & Schreiber Compo, 2015). However, some tactics were much less common than others. Interviewers focused heavily on relationship building. Interviewers, for instance, asked background questions about victims' lives unrelated to the topic of trafficking (e.g. 'Q: What kinds of things do you like to buy when you go shopping?'), questions consistent with best practice approaches and with what has been observed in prior studies of forensic interviews with vulnerable witnesses (Lamb et al., 2009; Lyon, 2014; Vallano & Schreiber Compo, 2015). In contrast, interviewers less frequently used another form of rapport, cued invitations, as a way of eliciting longer narrative responses. Here, less than 2% of turns involved such invitations, substantially lower than the 30% or more typically seen in NICHD protocol interviews with suspected child victims of abuse (Lamb et al., 2018; Orbach et al., 2000).

As a final note, we saw very few indications of supportive questioning from the federal interviewers and virtually none by the police. Similar findings, that is, minimal use of support, were reported by Lindholm et al. (2015) in their sample of 24 interviews with trafficking victims in Sweden between 14 and 21 years of age. Given the potential value of supportive interviewing in enhancing children's disclosures of abuse and reducing both children's and adolescents' suggestibility (Blasbalg et al., 2018; Hershkowitz et al., 2015, 2017; Quas et al., 2014; Saywitz et al., 2019), greater emphasis in training on the provision of support to adolescent trafficking victims may be of value in the future. Of course, it will also be important to ensure that support is not paired with manipulative tactics that could undermine its potential benefit with these same victims (Nogalska et al., 2021).

Second, we observed differences in how federal and local law enforcement allocated their time. That is, despite interview length being similar between the groups, federal interviewers devoted more time to preparing minor victims for substantive questioning. Longer pre-substantive questioning affords interviewers more time to establish rapport with interviewees; rapport building also has downstream effects on cooperation, disclosure and report completeness in other youth victims (Lyon, 2014). Insofar as federal interviewers' greater focus on pre-substantive questioning, or at least greater focus relative to that of police, increases victims' comfort and later willingness to disclose, the federal interviewers could then be more efficient with substantive questions. Whether such a pattern actually exists, though, and the amount of time spent in pre-substantive questioning is related to victims' disclosure completeness, needs to be examined directly. It will be especially important to compare the precise ways that pre-substantive questions are approached, which may be equally if not more important in influencing victims' disclosure tendencies (Dianiska et al., 2024).

And third, given that the federal interviewers spent more time during the preparation phase than police, it is perhaps unsurprising that federal interviewers also provided instructions, built rapport and engaged in supportive interviewing at a greater rate in our sample. This could reflect differences in the amount or type of training these two groups of law enforcement have received. Or, perhaps the federal interviewers approached the interviews with a different goal than that of the police, namely, with a goal of gathering information about the youth's experience. The police likely began interviews following suspicion of the youth being engaged in crime or delinquency and thus interrogated the youth as a suspect in a manner consistent with their training in interrogative techniques, such as those encouraged by Inbau et al. (2013). Nogalska et al. (2021) examined police interviews with suspected trafficking victims and found that the most commonly used tactics were maximisation and to a lesser extent minimisation and support. Both maximisation and support were associated with increased reluctance, perhaps because victims perceived the support as feigned or disingenuous when it was combined with traditional interrogation tactics. It will be important in subsequent research, ideally with interviewers who have had an array of prior training in different approaches to interviews, to examine how combinations of rapport building and support, including in conjunction with interrogative tactics, relate to victim productivity, reluctance and evasiveness.

LIMITATIONS, IMPLICATIONS, AND CONCLUSIONS

Our study is unique in its approach to documenting in a systematic manner how rapport is built with a particularly vulnerable population of victims, and the findings have important implications for both practice and future research. However, limitations should also be noted. First, our sample was small, and the federal interview and police transcripts were obtained via different mechanisms, with the latter being collected from the small subset of successfully prosecuted criminal trials in which interview transcripts comprised valuable pieces of evidence. Thus, the interviews, especially by the police, are unlikely to represent the full range of approaches interviewers take when they question suspected youth victims of sex trafficking. It will be of considerable interest to apply our same coding system to larger samples of interviews, obtained from a wider array of investigators, and, where possible, to collect information on the training of those professionals. Second, because we coded and analysed transcripts, we were able to consider verbal indicators of rapport and support. It will be important for future work to consider evaluating the use and effectiveness of non-verbal behaviours as well, given that nonverbal behaviours are often included when rapport and support have been manipulated in experimental research (see Bottoms et al., 2007; Saywitz et al., 2019).

Despite these limitations, our findings also point to at least two important recommendations. First, as has been repeatedly shown in studies with other vulnerable victim populations (see Gabbert et al., 2020; Lamb et al., 2018; Lavoie et al., 2021; Walsh & Bull, 2012), our findings suggest that investigators should spend time before introducing the substantive topic reviewing instructions and building rapport, using best practice tactics. These were evident in the present study to a small degree, though mostly among the federal interviewers. The tactics are likely to increase interviewee trust and comfort and could also improve later disclosure. Second, all interviewers, but especially local law enforcement, need more comprehensive training regarding best practice approaches to questioning vulnerable adolescent victim populations, including trafficked youth, and about victim characteristics and potential reluctance and evasiveness in interviews. The knowledge gleaned from the training may help them be more trauma-informed in their interactions, thereby improving victim reporting and ideally better collection of evidence as a result.

In closing, this study provides much-needed knowledge relevant to eliciting disclosures from vulnerable populations of adolescent victims, namely, those who may have experienced sex trafficking. Trafficking victims are often reluctant, and strategic approaches like providing instructions, building rapport and engaging in supportive questioning can be used to overcome disclosure reluctance and facilitate cooperation. We found that both federal and police interviewers are using some strategic interviewing approaches, though they differ in their frequency of use. Federal interviewers were more likely than police interviewers to provide youth with instructions and explanations, and to build rapport by asking about the youth's background, asking for open-ended narratives and using cued invitations to prompt more elaborations. Though supportive technique use was low in general, federal interviewers used reassurance and positive reinforcement more so than did police interviewers. Our results highlight the need to further develop and train interviewers on best practice approaches for overcoming disclosure reluctance in minor victims of trafficking.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no competing interests.

ETHICS APPROVAL

All procedures were performed in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

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