



## The story

“The Interview: Do Police Interrogation Techniques Produce False Confessions?”

By Douglas Starr

[http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2013/12/09/131209fa\\_fact\\_starr](http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2013/12/09/131209fa_fact_starr) (subscription required)  
or <http://www.theopennotebook.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/THE-INTERVIEW.pdf>

*New Yorker*, December 9, 2013

## The pitch

Dear Henry Finder,

For the past half-century hundreds of thousands of American police have been trained in interrogation by John Reid Associates of Chicago, which has a virtual monopoly in the field. The company’s seminars and guidebooks, which purport to create “human lie detectors,” have shaped every aspect of police interrogations, from the setup of the interview room to the highly-choreographed behavior of the police. You’ve seen the technique if you’ve ever been questioned by the police, by your company’s loss-prevention experts, or watched a cop show on TV.

But a growing body of evidence shows that the technique is ineffective, producing false confessions and mistaken results. The evidence has been accumulating for more than a decade in psychology labs and the real world – so much so that several countries have abandoned the technique. But American authorities, locked a culture of confronting the bad guys (which has only become more intense since 9/11) have resisted all attempts at reform.

Like many elements in our legal system, the Reid technique is an alleged scientific method that has neither science nor qualified scientists behind it. Developed by an ex-cop named John Reid in the 1940s as an alternative to the then-brutal third degree, it substitutes psychological manipulation for physical brutality. It comprises two tightly-choreographed sections. In the first, a “Behavior Analysis Interview,” the detective poses a series of questions and interprets speech patterns and body language to decide if the subject is lying. Then comes the “Formal Interrogation,” in which the detective breaks down the subject’s defenses through a series of steps that ratchet up anxiety and offer confession as the only relief. The technique is so effective, according to Reid’s promotional literature, that it increases confessions and case resolutions up to 97 percent of the time.

Yet psychology researchers in the U.S., Britain and Canada have found the training to be flawed. The behavioral cues that the technique relies on – such as fidgeting or averting one’s gaze –

occur just as commonly among truth-tellers under stress as liars. The steps during the “Formal Interrogation” phase that dominate a suspect and control his responses frequently convince innocent people of their own guilt. In other studies, volunteers who underwent Reid-style training in analyzing body language and speech scored worse on lie detection tests than untrained individuals – yet they were more confident about their abilities.

Experts say that this combination of ill-trained yet over-confident police is having devastating effects our legal system, although the effects are difficult to quantify. One measurement: of the nearly 300 people exonerated by DNA, more than 25 percent had been convicted on false confessions; most of which were extracted with Reid methodology. Yet that figure is the tip of an iceberg – it does not include non-DNA cases and plea bargains based on the presumption of guilt. Nor does it include the private-security industry that has permeated corporate America. In one instance, an Autozone employee named Joaquin Robles was fired by his employers after their Reid-trained security team forced him to confess to stealing \$820. When the money later turned up he successfully sued the company for \$7.5 million.

The Reid technique has become so discredited that several countries, including Britain, Australia, New Zealand, and parts of Canada forbid their police to use it and have substituted methods that rely on open-ended listening rather than intimidation. Unfortunately, this “soft” approach does not appeal to American police, intelligence and security experts.

I propose to investigate the Reid technique, the toll it's taken on convicting the innocent and the pseudoscience behind it. (I've spoken to the key researchers in the field here and abroad, and they all agree it's a story whose time has come.) Others have written about false confessions, but no one has analyzed the training that causes this system-wide problem in the first place.

As part of my investigation I plan to undergo Reid training myself – the company offers three-day seminars to corporate as well as public investigators. I'll also look at the efforts of the small cadre of American psychologists and ex-cops who are trying to replace this antiquated form of investigation, one precinct at a time.

My credentials: I'm co-director of the graduate program in Science Journalism at Boston University and a veteran journalist specializing in science and science policy. I've published two books with Knopf (both “Briefly Noted” in the New Yorker), one of which deals with the early days of forensic science and criminal psychology. My short works have appeared a variety of outlets, including Slate, The New Republic, Discover, Wired, Science, Smithsonian, Public Television, National Public Radio, The Los Angeles Times, and the Boston Sunday Globe Magazine. (For more information see: [douglasstarr.com/bio](http://douglasstarr.com/bio).)

Would your readers be interested?

Cordially,

Doug Starr