

INTERROGATIVE SUGGESTIBILITY

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1. Core Definition and Conceptualization

Interrogative suggestibility refers to the measurable degree to which an individual is susceptible to influence during a formal interrogation or questioning context, particularly when that influence stems from suggestive questioning techniques. This psychological construct is critical within forensic settings, as it dictates the reliability of witness testimonies and suspect confessions. Developed predominantly by Professor Gisli H. Gudjonsson, suggestibility is not simply a measure of general compliance but specifically targets how external pressure, combined with internal cognitive factors, can lead an individual to incorporate false details into their account or change previously reported information. It is defined by two primary behavioral manifestations: the tendency to accede to leading questions and the propensity to alter responses following the delivery of negative feedback or criticism regarding prior statements. This dynamic interplay between the external environment (the interviewer's technique) and the internal state (the interviewee's cognitive and psychological vulnerabilities) establishes interrogative suggestibility as a crucial factor in understanding the integrity of investigative interviews and the potential for wrongful convictions based on coerced or flawed evidence.

The conceptualization of interrogative suggestibility moves beyond simple memory failure, framing it instead as a compliance mechanism activated under stress or perceived authority. When an individual, especially one operating under compromised cognitive resources due to stress, anxiety, or intellectual disability, is subjected to persistent, suggestive questioning, their ability to maintain the veracity of their original memory trace diminishes. The resulting compliance is often driven by a perceived need to please the interrogator, escape the discomfort of the interview setting, or a genuine belief that the interrogator, as an authority figure, must possess superior knowledge about the event in question. Thus, suggestibility acts as a gateway through which external misinformation can contaminate genuine recollection, making it fundamentally different from related concepts such as general compliance or mere acquiescence, which do not necessarily involve the alteration of memory content.

Understanding this core definition requires distinguishing between high and low suggestibility. Individuals exhibiting **high interrogative suggestibility** are those who demonstrate a marked vulnerability to accepting and endorsing suggestions implicitly or explicitly contained within the interviewer's questions. This high susceptibility increases the risk of producing testimonies or confessions that are inaccurate, misleading, or entirely false. Conversely, those with **low interrogative suggestibility** possess greater cognitive and psychological resilience, enabling them to resist leading questions and maintain the integrity of their account, even in the face of

persistent pressure or critical feedback from the interviewer. This distinction underscores the necessity of assessing suggestibility in specific forensic populations, especially juveniles, individuals with mental health issues, or those experiencing extreme duress, to mitigate the potential for investigative errors.

2. Historical Development and Theoretical Foundations

The history of interrogative suggestibility research is intrinsically linked to early psychological studies on eyewitness testimony and the subsequent recognition of the phenomenon of **false confessions** in the latter half of the 20th century. While psychologists like Elizabeth Loftus pioneered work on the malleability of memory and the effects of leading questions (the misinformation effect), Gudjonsson's work in the 1980s provided the necessary empirical framework to specifically measure this susceptibility within the coercive environment of a police interrogation. This shift allowed suggestibility to be operationalized not just as a laboratory curiosity but as a forensic variable relevant to legal proceedings. The development was spurred by high-profile cases where individuals confessed to crimes they did not commit, highlighting the severe consequences of unchecked coercive interrogation techniques.

Gudjonsson's theoretical model posits suggestibility as a situational variable--meaning it is highly dependent on the interaction between the individual's personality traits and the immediate environmental pressures of the interview. The model highlights two critical mediators: **state anxiety** and **expectancy of success**. High anxiety, often induced by the intimidating nature of an interrogation, impairs cognitive functioning and resource allocation, making the interviewee more reliant on external cues. Simultaneously, a low expectancy of successfully resisting the interrogator's pressure, coupled with a desire to terminate the uncomfortable situation, fuels compliance. The model thus explains suggestibility as a defensive, stress-induced coping mechanism rather than solely a fundamental cognitive deficit, providing a comprehensive foundation for understanding why typically non-suggestible individuals might exhibit suggestible behavior under extreme duress.

This theoretical foundation draws heavily on cognitive theories of memory retrieval, specifically concerning how confidence and uncertainty interact under social pressure. When interviewees are uncertain about their memory, suggestive questions or negative feedback can be interpreted as authoritative input that fills memory gaps. The resulting memory alteration is not necessarily intentional lying, but rather a genuine adoption of the suggested details, a process known as **memory distrust syndrome**. Therefore, the theoretical underpinnings stress that interrogative suggestibility is a complex psychological vulnerability that exploits normal human reliance on authority and contextually appropriate information seeking, particularly when one's internal memory resources are perceived as inadequate or unreliable.

3. Measurement and Assessment: The Gudjonsson Suggestibility Scales (GSS)

The empirical assessment of interrogative suggestibility is overwhelmingly standardized through the use of the **Gudjonsson Suggestibility Scales (GSS)**, specifically the GSS 1 and GSS 2, which are the primary tools recognized globally for forensic psychological assessment. These scales operationalize the theoretical definition by measuring the two core components of suggestibility--Yield and Shift--in a controlled, standardized setting that simulates the dynamics of an investigative interview. The GSS procedure involves reading a short narrative to the participant, testing their recall, and then subjecting them to a series of highly structured, suggestive questions (Yield), followed by critical, negative feedback and repetition of the suggestive questions (Shift). This methodology allows clinicians and researchers to quantify an individual's susceptibility to influence under conditions of psychological pressure, providing objective data regarding their potential vulnerability in a real police interview.

The procedure begins with the presentation of a specific, detailed story designed to be moderately difficult to recall completely. After a period of initial free and cued recall, the crucial second phase commences: the administration of fifteen highly **leading questions**. The number of errors the interviewee makes during this phase, accepting the misinformation embedded within the questions, forms the basis for the Yield measure. Following the suggestive questioning, the interviewee is given a standardized negative feedback statement--a form of authoritative criticism suggesting their previous recall was poor and that they need to try harder to be accurate. This criticism is designed to increase state anxiety and lower self-confidence, simulating the psychological pressure often exerted in a real interrogation. The subsequent change in responses after this negative feedback is what quantifies the Shift component of suggestibility.

The importance of the GSS lies in its ability to generate specific metrics (Total Suggestibility, Yield 1, Yield 2, and Shift) that are consistently correlated with clinical and cognitive vulnerabilities. Scores generated by the GSS are routinely presented as expert evidence in courts around the world, particularly in cases involving vulnerable suspects or contested confessions, to help juries and judges evaluate the reliability of the evidence obtained during the interview. While the GSS is highly valued for its standardization and empirical rigor, its administration requires specialized training to ensure that the subtle psychological pressures are applied consistently and ethically, maintaining its validity as a simulation tool for assessing forensic vulnerability.

4. Components of Interrogative Suggestibility: Yield and Shift

Interrogative suggestibility is analytically divided into two distinct, yet related, components: **Yield** (or compliance to leading questions) and **Shift** (or responsiveness to negative feedback). The Yield component specifically measures the degree to which an individual responds to suggestive or

leading questions by incorporating the suggested content into their narrative, thereby altering the factual basis of their previous statement. This directly relates to the source content's mention of "the degree to which an individual will respond to leading questions." Yield reflects the immediate vulnerability of the interviewee to the manipulative framing of questions, often driven by a lack of confidence in their own memory or a desire to conform to the perceived expectations of the interrogator. High Yield scores are problematic because they indicate a high propensity to accept externally supplied misinformation, making the resulting testimony highly unreliable, regardless of whether explicit pressure has been applied.

The Shift component addresses the more severe form of suggestibility, measuring the tendency of an interviewee "to alter previous responses when receiving **negative feedback**." This alteration occurs after the interviewer explicitly or implicitly criticizes the subject's initial performance, creating acute psychological pressure. Shift reflects vulnerability to authority and coercion. An individual with a high Shift score is not only susceptible to the immediate suggestion within a question but is also prone to fundamentally changing their entire memory account under duress, driven by the belief that the authority figure (the interviewer) must be correct about the "facts" they are suggesting. Shift is often considered a more worrying indicator of forensic vulnerability than Yield, as it demonstrates profound instability in the memory report under psychological challenge.

While both Yield and Shift contribute to the total suggestibility score, they operate through slightly different mechanisms. Yield is often linked to cognitive factors like poor memory encoding or retrieval, and uncertainty, whereas Shift is more closely linked to personality traits, anxiety, and compliance motivation. Research has shown that various clinical populations, such as those with learning disabilities or certain psychiatric conditions, may score highly on one component but not necessarily the other, highlighting the importance of assessing both separately. For instance, an intellectually disabled individual might show high Yield due to difficulty resisting leading questions, but a highly compliant but otherwise cognitively intact individual might show a high Shift score after being emotionally battered by criticism, emphasizing the multidimensional nature of this forensic concept.

5. Factors Influencing Suggestibility

Interrogative suggestibility is not a fixed trait but is influenced by a complex confluence of cognitive, personality, and situational factors. Among the most influential cognitive factors is **intelligence quotient** (IQ) and intellectual impairment. Numerous studies have established a robust negative correlation between IQ and suggestibility; individuals with lower intellectual functioning, particularly those with learning disabilities, consistently demonstrate higher suggestibility scores on the GSS. This is generally attributed to poorer memory skills, difficulty understanding complex questions, and a reduced capacity for critical evaluation of external information, making them significantly more vulnerable in investigative settings. Furthermore, specific deficits in attention and executive

functioning, often associated with conditions like Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), can also heighten suggestibility.

Personality dimensions and internal psychological states also play a crucial role. High levels of **trait anxiety**--a persistent tendency to feel anxious across various situations--are strongly associated with increased suggestibility, particularly the Shift component, as anxious individuals are more motivated to resolve the stressful situation quickly by complying. Likewise, low self-esteem and high levels of compliance (the general willingness to conform to requests) are predictors of increased vulnerability. Clinically, conditions such as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and acute depression can significantly impair cognitive resources and emotional regulation, leading to heightened states of psychological distress during questioning, which in turn elevates suggestibility scores, making the reliability of any statement obtained under such duress highly questionable.

Crucially, external, situational factors inherent to the interrogation environment dramatically moderate suggestibility. The quality and style of the interview are paramount. Highly coercive or aggressive interview techniques, prolonged deprivation of sleep or food, isolation, and the constant threat of perceived punishment elevate state anxiety and diminish psychological resilience, increasing susceptibility even among individuals who are otherwise low in suggestibility. The presence of **authoritative figures** and the perceived certainty of the interrogator regarding the suspect's guilt can create an overwhelming social pressure that encourages compliance and the acceptance of suggested facts. Therefore, best-practice interview guidelines, such as the PACE guidelines (Police and Criminal Evidence Act) in the UK, emphasize non-suggestive, rapport-building methods to avoid contaminating evidence, thereby demonstrating the direct link between external factors and the realization of interrogative suggestibility.

6. Legal and Forensic Significance

The forensic significance of interrogative suggestibility cannot be overstated, particularly its profound implications for the validity of confessions and eyewitness testimony within the judicial system. When a suspect exhibits high levels of suggestibility, any confession or detailed testimony obtained through suggestive or coercive interviewing methods becomes inherently unreliable, even if the individual genuinely believes the altered details they are reporting. The assessment of suggestibility is often a mandatory component of the psychological evaluation of vulnerable suspects, especially those with identified intellectual deficits or mental health challenges, to determine if they were competent to provide a reliable statement during the police interview. The results of the GSS often serve as **expert testimony** used to challenge the admissibility of evidence, arguing that the statement was likely influenced by external pressure rather than being a truthful account of memory.

Interrogative suggestibility is a major contributing factor in documented cases of **false confessions**. These confessions, which occur when an innocent person admits guilt, are often categorized into three types: voluntary, coerced-compliant, and coerced-internalized. Individuals high in interrogative suggestibility are particularly prone to coerced-internalized false confessions, where they come to genuinely believe that they committed the crime based on the suggestive input and psychological pressure applied during the interrogation. This belief stems from the psychological mechanism where the subject distrusts their own memory and replaces it with the authoritative narrative provided by the interviewer. The devastating consequence is that these confessions, though often retracted, are powerful pieces of evidence that frequently lead to wrongful convictions, making the objective assessment of suggestibility a safeguard against judicial error.

Furthermore, the concept informs procedural justice and investigative best practices globally. The understanding that certain individuals are inherently more vulnerable to suggestive questioning has led to widespread adoption of specific interviewing protocols, such as the PEACE model (Planning and preparation; Engage and explain; Account, closure; Evaluation), which mandates non-coercive, information-gathering approaches instead of accusatorial, confession-seeking tactics. By training investigators to avoid leading questions, refrain from providing negative feedback, and conduct interviews in environments that minimize stress, the justice system attempts to control the situational variables that activate suggestibility, thereby enhancing the reliability and ethical integrity of the evidence collected.

7. Debates and Criticisms

While the construct of interrogative suggestibility and the GSS are foundational to forensic psychology, they are subject to ongoing academic and practical debates. A primary debate centers on the **state versus trait** nature of suggestibility. While Gudjonsson's model positions it as an interaction, some critics argue that the GSS measures a stable personality trait, while others contend it is overwhelmingly a temporary state influenced entirely by acute situational stressors. This distinction is critical in court: if suggestibility is a stable trait, the GSS score is highly predictive; if it is only a state, the score may not accurately reflect the individual's susceptibility during the actual police interview, which may have involved different stressors.

Another significant criticism concerns the limitations and ecological validity of the GSS itself. Although highly standardized, the GSS is a laboratory-based simulation, and some researchers question whether the pressure exerted by the standardized negative feedback in the GSS truly replicates the intense, high-stakes psychological coercion of a real-world, hours-long police interrogation. Furthermore, the GSS methodology involves a single narrative recall task, which may not adequately generalize to the complex, emotionally charged memory tasks required in a real crime investigation. Critics advocate for developing context-specific suggestibility measures that

account for varying emotional states and types of memory involved (e.g., autobiographical versus semantic memory).

Finally, cross-cultural and population-specific issues pose challenges. Research suggests that the normative scoring for the GSS may not translate perfectly across different cultures or languages, necessitating careful interpretation and local validation. Moreover, while suggestibility is well-studied in populations with intellectual disabilities, its manifestations and measurement in other vulnerable groups--such as those with severe psychiatric disorders like schizophrenia or individuals under the influence of certain drugs--require further refinement. These ongoing debates highlight the necessity for continued research to ensure that the measurement and application of interrogative suggestibility remain scientifically robust and legally relevant as forensic investigation methods evolve globally.

Further Reading

[Interrogative Suggestibility \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[False Confessions and Suggestibility \(Psychology Today\)](#)

[Gudjonsson, G. H. \(1984\). A new scale of interrogative suggestibility. Personality and Individual Differences.](#)

[Gudjonsson, G. H. \(2003\). The Psychology of Interrogations and Confessions: A Handbook.](#)

[The Innocence Project: False Confessions](#)