

Professor Lorraine Hope explains

WHAT SOURCES MEAN WHEN THEY SAY "I DON'T KNOW"



When a source responds to a question with either 'I don't know' or 'I don't remember', that may well be a legitimate response.

However, these responses may also reflect several cognitive, social and motivational states.

Therefore, when a source says, 'I don't know' or 'I don't remember' they may have a number of reasons for doing so. Here we categorise potential reasons underlying these responses and provide examples that illustrate each reason.

For a more detailed breakdown on each category go to: www.crestresearch.ac.uk/news/idontknow where you can download a poster for each section.

MOTIVATION & STRATEGY

EXAMPLE

- I'm afraid/I feel trapped or under pressure.
- I was asked to keep it a secret/don't want anyone to find out.
- I need to protect some people close to me.

EXPLANATION

- Revealing the information may bring other people into the investigation/put other people at risk/betray friends or family.
- Ideological or group allegiances.

RESPONSE

- Acknowledge and provide assurances (where possible).
- Explore issues and concerns.
- Develop rapport and trust, highlighting the benefits of disclosed information.
- Reframe: not a secret, not a betrayal; benefits others, still within in-group.

PERSONAL MOTIVATION

EXAMPLE

- I was intoxicated/high.
- I was extremely tired/disoriented/feeling confused.

EXPLANATION

- May not want to admit to self-inflicted states or perceived weaknesses.
- Worry that admitting to these states may make them appear incompetent or unreliable.

RESPONSE

- Establish what the state at encoding was – but do not dismiss memory.
- Use memory-enhancing techniques (mental reinstatement of context, open-questions, free report).
- Avoid leading questions, option-posing, suggestions.

MEMORY & COGNITION

MEMORY ENCODING



MEMORY RETRIEVAL

EXAMPLE

- It happened so many times I'm not sure what exactly happened on the occasion.

EXPLANATION

- Difficulties with particularisation of a single instance when distinguishing between similar events (e.g., repeated abuse, domestic violence).
- Problems identifying source of a particular memory (source monitoring).

RESPONSE

- Ensure clarity when questioning about repeated events.
- Use methods that might assist discrimination between repeated events (specific dates, times, details or temporal placing, i.e., 'the time before last').
- Seek particularisation (if relevant).

INTERVIEW CONTEXT

EXAMPLE

- I think I was wrong on a previous answer so I don't want to get it wrong again.
- The information I have contradicts or doesn't fit with what you have told me/implied, so I don't want to say.
- I saw/recall something, but several people are being interviewed and I want to avoid being contradicted by another source.

EXPLANATION

- Interviewees may feel embarrassed/worried they have provided incorrect information; go along with interviewer (or fabricate) to avoid conflict.
- Interviewees make assumptions about what the interviewers think/know.

RESPONSE

- Develop rapport and trust, highlighting the benefits of disclosed information.
- Use metacognitive evaluations (confidence evaluations).
- Assure that their account is important and people can witness/observe things in different ways.
- Normalise error (e.g., acknowledge that task is difficult and errors may occur).

EXPECTATION & SECOND GUESSING

DISTRUST, CYNICISM & HOSTILITY

EXAMPLE

- I don't trust you with this information.
- You might use this information against me.

EXPLANATION

- Doubts about the interviewer's intentions towards them or their ability to look after their safety.
- A perception of loss of control and they are entering a process that once started cannot be stopped.

RESPONSE

- Rapport, acknowledge, assurances (where possible).
- Develop rapport and trust, highlighting the benefits of disclosed information.
- Explore issues and concerns.
- Explain processes for information security and source protection.

