All Articles

Newspaper Coverage

8-1-1954

54/08/01 Interrogators Put Lie On Skids

Cleveland Plain Dealer

Recommended Citation

Cleveland Plain Dealer, "54/08/01 Interrogators Put Lie On Skids" (1954). *All Articles*. 352.
https://engagedscholarship.csuohio.edu/newspaper_coverage/352

INTERROGATORS PUT LIE ON SKIDS

Skilled Questioners Boost Ally: Psychology

BY TODD SIMON

The homicide chief judiciously placed a cheap felt hat (it had been found near the murder scene) on a chair and then had the suspect brought in.

Serenely, the suspect went over the details of his alibi. Then his eyes l a n d e d on the hat. He gulped, took one guilty look at the officer and spilled out a full confession.

That happened here not too many years ago.

Thousands of other criminals have "kicked in" since then, but this is the only one on record who was "broken down" by a paltry, dirty, untraceable hunk of haberdashery.

"When he saw that he figured we knew a lot more than he had thought we knew," explained the man who stage-managed the confession, Lieut. Martin P. Cooney.

Lie Is Difficult

"From then on he was afraid that any question we'd ask him we'd catch him in a lie and know he was lying."

All the many techniques of worming, wheedling, scaring or pulling the truth out of balky citizens must depend on the mental mechanics wrapped up in this example, the champion interrogators have said.

From what they say, you can deduce that (a) it is uncomfortable and difficult to stick to a lie and keep on supporting it. Trying to do it may make you look like a fool, and plenty of quiz victims would rather do anything -- even confess — than look foolish.

And (b) it is a relief to get the truth out because it makes you feel less guilty.

Works Both Ways

Former Inspector Edward J. Flanagan shook his head wonderingly and chuckled when he once said:

"The cop brings in prisoners and says to them: 'Aw, come on, Louie, clean your shirt. Get it off your chest. You'll feel better.' And he gets their confessions and sends them off to serve their time.

"And then he gets caught drinking on duty and his sergeant brings him into his office and says to him: 'Aw, come on, Joe, clean your shirt. Get it off your chest. You'll feel better.'

"And what does the damn fool do? He kicks in just like the guys he has been doing it to!"

Public Suspicious

Brought up on a suspicion of secret third-degree methods—the glaring, bare bulb overhead, the plugugly cops — the American public as encountered at almost any bar may not believe it, but merely catching a suspect in a little lie can lead to new lies that finally become so absurd that the liar cannot say them without blushing.

So the top-flight interrogators say.

On the other hand, wringing out admissions depends upon the way different personalities strike each other. Some would not lie to a Dutch uncle type. Others will break down only before a lean, sour, skeptical kind of cop.

Compare Notes

That is one reason for switching interrogators or for working in pairs—often one a little rough in his language, the other placating and friendly. Or one with a gimlet or fishy eye and the other all smiles.

Even if lawbreakers know all that, and they do because they sit and compare experiences in the reformatory or in the anteroom of the probation office, they still—most of them—eventually "tell all."

Those are the forces on the side of the interrogators when they lay siege to stubborn minds. Police would be far less successful if most suspects did not join the clean-shirt club after a standard police question session.