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Beyond information gathering: Interviewee details as part of police questioning

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Introduction

Investigative interview has two major objectives: **gathering information** to further the investigation and the prosecution as well as **assessing the witness's reliability** (Kebbell & Wagstaff, 1997).

What is the forensically relevant information that investigators should collect? A consensus has been reached in the scientific literature. **Investigation-relevant information – IRI** – corresponds to information on **actions, persons, objects, environmental context, and sounds/conversations** (subjective details are often not scored) (see Phillips et al., 2012).

Investigators also need to **assess the reliability** of the information collected. It is likely that investigative interviewers cover a range of reliability factors (Wilford & Wells, 2013) while conducting the interview, by asking specific questions related to the interviewee. To our knowledge, the **interviewee details – ID** – that investigative interviewers collect have never been examined.

The aims of the present study were to examine to what extent investigative interviewers gather **investigation-relevant information (IRI)** compared to **interviewee details (ID)** and to analyse the content of these questions.

Method

Participants

42 experienced Police Officers: 15 women and 27 men. Mean age: 36.41 years ($SD = 6.28$). They held ranks ranging from the French equivalent of police constable to inspector.

Procedure

Material

Six videos that depicted a typical gun crime involving two or more assailants.



Mock-witnesses

Each police officer participated in two simulated investigative interviews, once as a mock witness and once as a mock investigator.

Mock-interviewers

The police officers were instructed to conduct an interview as they would do it on the job when working on the preliminary stage of an investigation.

Scoring

We analyzed the **content of the questions** asked by police officers. Interviewers searched **on average for 47.40 items of information** per interview (95% CI [41.71, 53.10]).

(i) We distinguished between IRI “**What colour was the bag?**” and ID “**Are you sure?**”

(ii) We performed thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006)

Note. The present poster is based on the published paper: Launay, C., Py, J., Brunel, M., & Demarchi, S. (2021). Beyond investigation-relevant information: a content analysis of police questioning. *Police Practice and Research*, 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15614263.2020.1869002>

<https://www.tandfonline.com/eprint/AGX2SQQFCRN2MR9UFVXV/full?target=10.1080/15614263.2020.1869002>

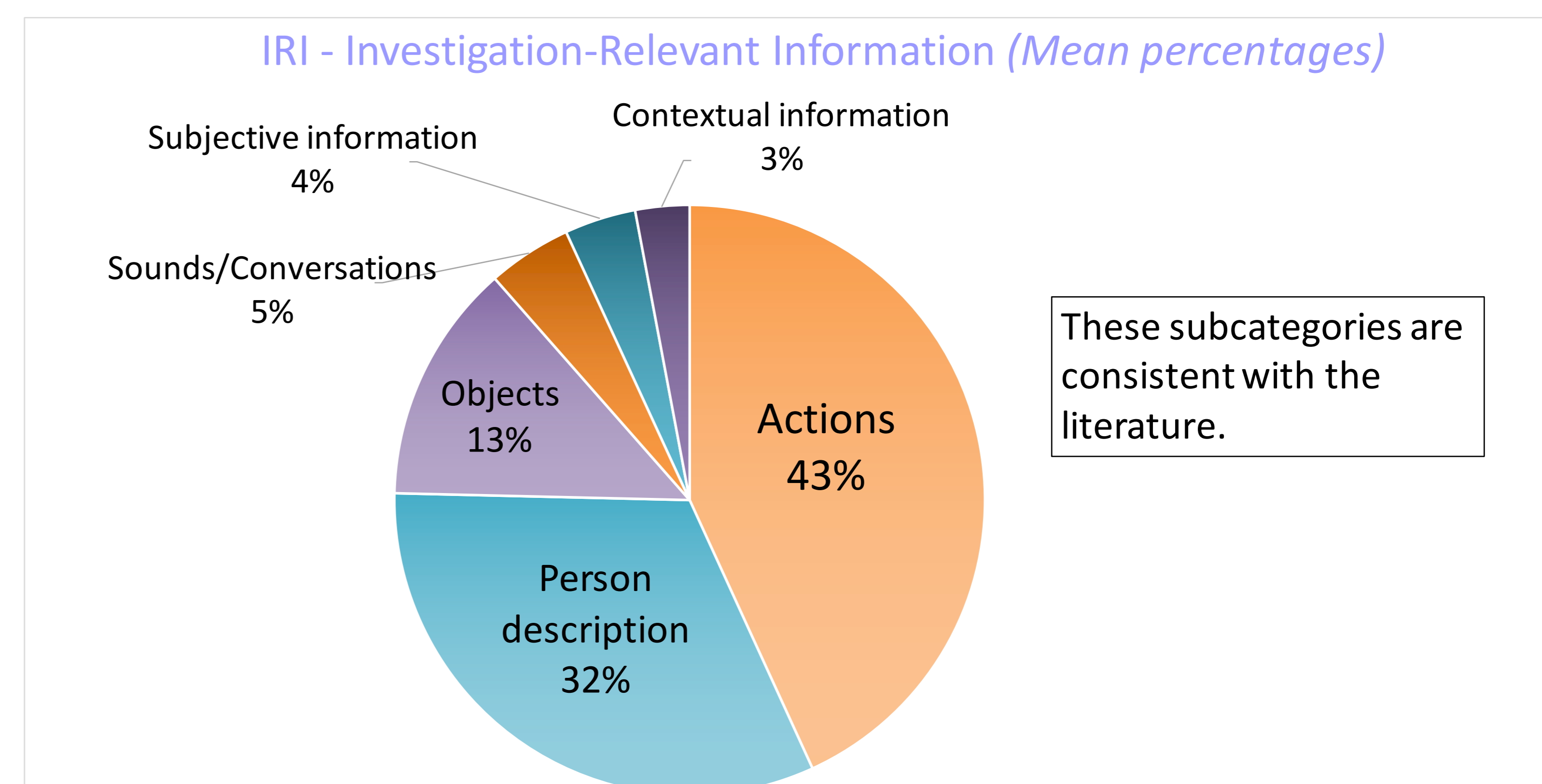
Results

What are the proportions of questions asked?

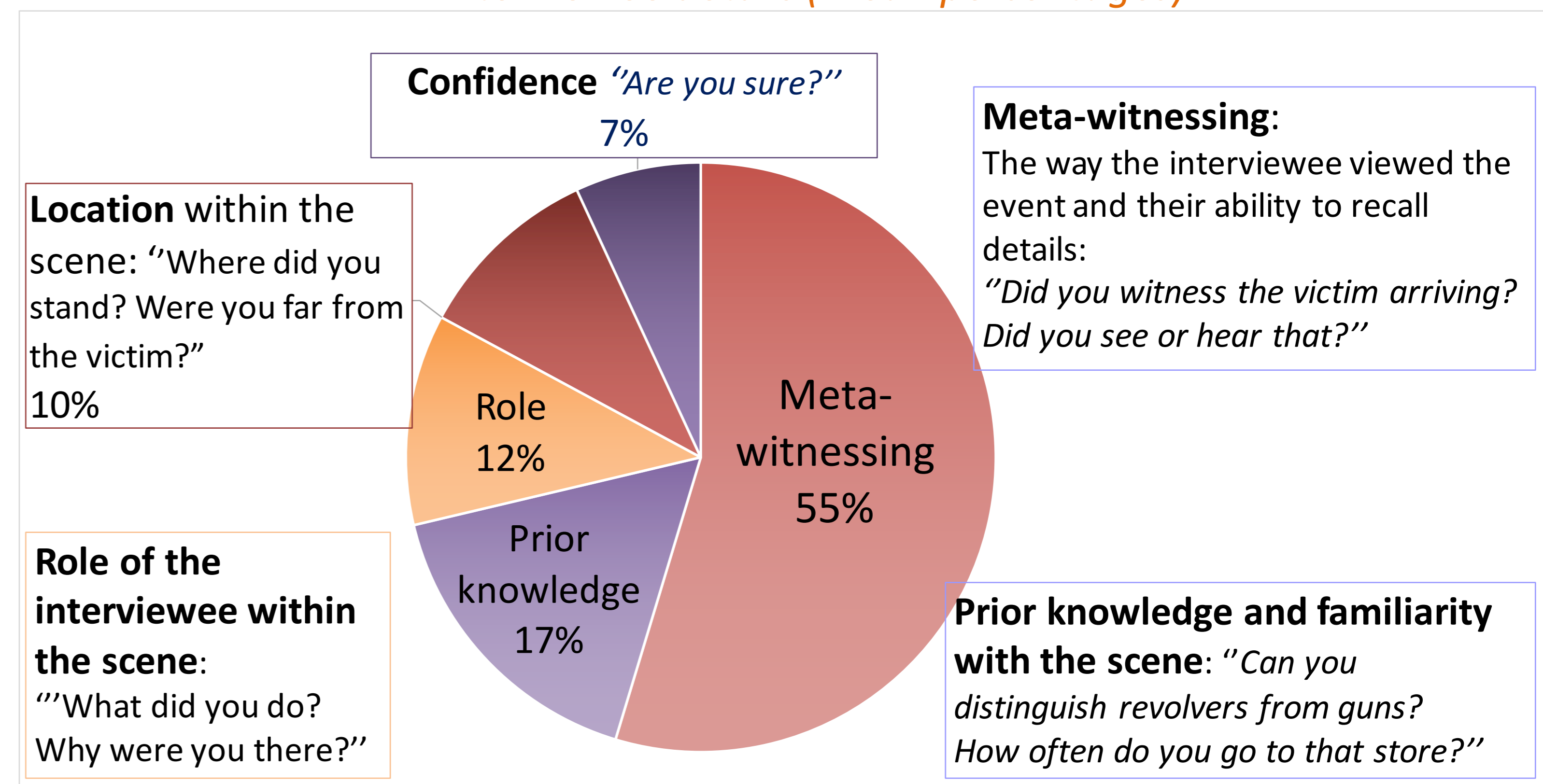
IRI – Investigation-Relevant Information questions accounted for **78%** of the questions asked ($M = 37.12$, $SD = 15.70$, 95% CI [32.23, 42.01]).

ID – Interviewee Details questions accounted for **22%** of the questions asked ($M = 10.29$, $SD = 5.36$, 95% CI [8.62, 11.96]).

What is the content of questions asked?



ID – Interviewee details (Mean percentages)



Discussion

Interviewee details (ID) are an important part of police questioning: they represent **one question out of every five** asked by the police officers. A subcategory of ID emerged from the analyses, which corresponds to the way the interviewee perceived the event and represents more than half of the ID questions (55%). We named it **meta-witnessing**. Meta-witnessing-related questions may help prevent witnesses from committing source memory errors by allowing better access to their source memory (source-monitoring theory, Johnson et al., 1993).

More studies are needed to understand the role of ID questions in investigative interviews. Researchers would then be able to develop effective interviewing instructions based on professionals’ operational needs.

References