

Rapport-Building in Investigative Interviews of Alleged Child Sexual Abuse Victims

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### Abstract

Research shows that both utterance type and rapport-building can affect children's productivity during the substantive phase of investigative interviews. However, few researchers have examined the effects of utterance type and content on children's productivity within the rapport-building phase. In the present study, transcripts of interviews with 94 4- to 13-year-old alleged victims were examined. Interviews were conducted using either the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) Protocol or the Memorandum of Good Practice (MoGP). The NICHD Protocol interviews contained more invitations and questions about events and hobbies/likes than the MoGP interviews. Children's productivity was associated with utterance type and topic, showing both the benefits of invitations and questions asking about past events. Our findings complement research focusing on the substantive phase of child forensic interviews, suggesting that both utterance type and prompt content during the rapport-building phase can affect children's immediate productivity.

*Keywords:* child investigative interviewing, rapport-building, child witnesses

### Rapport-Building in Investigative Interviews of Alleged Child Sexual Abuse Victims

Children's forensic reports about alleged sexual abuse must be as complete and reliable as possible due to the secretive and private nature of sexual abuse (Lamb, 1994), the fact that medical evidence is rare (Finkel, 2009), and the reality that suspects often lie or are unwilling to confess (Lamb, Hershkowitz, Orbach, & Esplin, 2008). Research on how to elicit reliable and rich testimonies from children has amassed over the past few decades (Lamb et al., 2008; Sternberg et al., 1997), often focusing on the elicitation of high quality accounts (Lamb, Sternberg, & Esplin, 2000; Lamb et al., 2002) by examining question type (Brown et al., 2013; Lamb et al., 1996) rather than question content. Additionally, a few researchers have examined interviewers' and children's performance during the rapport-building phase. By comparing two widely used child interviewing protocols, we examined the kinds of utterances used by interviewers, the content of these utterances, and their effects on children's productivity during the rapport-building phase of investigative interviews.

There is universal agreement amongst professionals that high quality rapport-building facilitates children's comfort during forensic interviews (Brown et al., 2013; Hershkowitz, 2009, 2011; Sternberg, Lamb, Davies, & Westcott, 2001; Wood, McClure, & Birch, 1996). Discussing non-threatening topics can help put at ease children who may feel embarrassed talking about maltreatment (Brown et al., 2013; Hershkowitz, 2011; Roberts, Lamb, & Sternberg, 2004). Effective rapport-building can increase report accuracy (Hershkowitz, 2011), completeness (Wood et al., 1996), and resistance to misleading questions (Roberts et al., 2004; Wood et al., 1996). Investigating the productivity of interviewer prompts in the rapport-building phase is important because interviewers may gauge children's comfort by their talkativeness, which might offer an index of children's readiness to transition to the substantive phase of the interview (Hershkowitz, 2011).

What makes for a successful rapport-building phase is unclear. Although rapport-building employing open-ended questions about past events can increase the amount of information children initially report about abuse (Sternberg et al., 1997) and the reliability of information about past events (Roberts et al., 2004), very little is known about how different topics discussed during rapport-building might affect children's immediate productivity.

Invitations elicit lengthier responses and more reliable responses from children than closed-ended prompts (e.g., Lamb et al., 1996). The use of invitations during the rapport-building phase may be critical because they may help children feel that they have a central role in the interview (i.e., can decide what information they want to report; Hershkowitz, 2011; Roberts et al., 2004), which motivates them to report detailed information. Invitations might also signal the interviewers' personal interest in children by focusing broadly on topics (e.g., 'What happened at your birthday?') rather than specific inquiries that might appear pointed or challenging (e.g., 'What kind of cake did you have?').

Despite the fact that different guidelines offer a large variety of topics for rapport-building in investigative interviews (Sanders, Schwartz, & Mohay, 1985; Anderson et al., 2010; APSAC, 2012), little research has examined the topics discussed during rapport-building. In a study examining courtroom transcripts, lawyers attempted to build rapport by requesting demographic information even though such questions elicited very little information from the children (Ahern, Stolzenberg, & Lyon, 2015). In an examination of child forensic interviews, question content affected the amount of details children reported about the allegation but question content was not examined during rapport building (Lamb et al., 2003).

The Memorandum of Good Practice (Home Office, 1992), a predecessor of the Achieving Best Evidence guidelines used in the United Kingdom today, and the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) Protocol (Orbach et al., 2000;

Lamb et al., 2008) both stress the importance of the rapport-building phase (Lamb et al., 2009; Sternberg, Lamb, Davies et al., 2001). However, the protocols suggest different ways to achieve rapport (Brown et al., 2013; Teoh & Lamb, 2010). The MoGP recommends simply that interviewers engage children in a ‘free discussion’ about events in their life unrelated to the offence (e.g., favourite television programmes, school, play group; Home Office, 1992). In contrast, the NICHD Protocol advises that the rapport-building phase should include a discussion of children’s hobbies and likes (to establish initial comfort), followed by episodic memory training via prompts about neutral past events (to familiarize children with free recall memory retrieval and the amount of detail expected from them) (Brown et al., 2013; Lamb, Sternberg, & Esplin, 1998). Additionally, the NICHD Protocol models open-ended prompts that interviewers can adapt for rapport-building whereas the MoGP does not model prompts for the rapport-building phase.

### **Present Study**

Despite consensus amongst experts that the rapport-building phase is a crucial element of the forensic interview, little is known about strategies interviewers should use to prepare children for the substantive phase (Teoh & Lamb, 2010). Whilst there has been a substantial amount of research on the productivity of different utterance types during the substantive phase of forensic interviews, few studies have focused on the utterance types and utterance contents during the rapport-building phase. In the present study we examined the interplay between utterance type, content and responsiveness during the rapport-building phases of NICHD and MoGP forensic interviews.

We predicted that:

- 1) The NICHD Protocol interviews would contain proportionally more invitations and questions about events than MoGP interviews due to the specific guidance in the NICHD Protocol.

2) Invitations would elicit more words than other utterance types as suggested by other research (e.g., Sternberg et al., 1997).

3) Questions about events would elicit more words in the NICHD Protocol interviews than in the MoGP interviews because NICHD Protocol interviews would likely contain more opportunities to practice responding to questions about events.

## **Method**

### **Sample**

Ninety-four forensic interviews with alleged child sexual abuse victims were examined (sample described by Lamb and colleagues (2009)). The interviews were conducted by police officers from a mid-sized Constabulary in the British Midlands. Forty-six of these interviews were conducted using the MoGP, whilst the other 48 were conducted following the NICHD Protocol. The same five police officers conducted both NICHD Protocol and MoGP interviews, with ten colleagues in the same Constabulary also conducting one or more MoGP interviews, to ensure that the required number of matched interviews were available for analysis (Lamb et al., 2009). The majority of these police officers had less than one year of experience investigating sex crimes involving children (Lamb et al., 2009). The MoGP interviews were conducted immediately before the NICHD Protocol was implemented (Lamb et al., 2009). All interviewers in this study had been trained to conduct interviews according to the MoGP (such training was generally provided on a 5-day investigative interviewing course by the local Area Child Protection Committee), although there was no uniform policy regarding training (Lamb et al., 2009). Prior to the implementation of the NICHD Protocol, interviewers took part in a 5-day training programme. This course included an explanation of the empirical and conceptual support for each of the phases of the interview, as well as examples of both appropriate and inappropriate interviewing techniques (Lamb et al., 2009). Subsequently, interviewers who had been

instructed to use the NICHD Protocol were given the opportunity to practice using the Protocol under the trainers' guidance (Lamb et al., 2009). Interviewers were then observed conducting field forensic interviews and given detailed feedback (Lamb et al., 2009).

The interviews in each group were matched with respect to the children's ages, gender, and abuse type. Children were on average 9.28 years ( $SD = 2.55$ ) old (83% females).

### **Coding**

Interviews were transcribed, checked for accuracy, and anonymised. Each conversational turn (i.e., interviewer question and child answer pair) within the rapport-building phase of the interview (excluding the ground rules) was coded for utterance type and content. If multiple questions were asked in one conversational turn, the final question was coded. Because the MoGP interviews did not always contain a discrete rapport phase, the rapport-building phase was defined as ending once the first question about abuse was asked.

**Utterance type.** The NICHD utterance type classifications were adapted for the rapport-building phase (Lamb et al., 2009; see Table 1). Both questions and statements were classified. Invitations were defined as input-free utterances, directives were defined as questions aiming to refocus the child's attention on specific details, and option-posing utterances were defined as questions which asked children to affirm, negate, or select a particular option suggested by the interviewer. Suggestive utterances were not identified because information suggesting abuse was not mentioned during the rapport-building phase. Utterances that assumed information (e.g., 'You must like birthday parties', 'I bet you are a really nice big sister') were classified as presumptive. Utterances not requesting information but implying confirmation that the child understand what the interviewer means were classified as statements (e.g., informing the child about interview procedures or summaries of what the child previously said). Because presumptive utterances and statements could take

on a variety of linguistic forms and do not necessarily request information from children other than affirmations, they were excluded from productivity analyses.

**Content type.** Interviewer prompt content was coded with reference to the NICHD Protocol rapport-building topics (hobbies/likes, past events, other). The “other” category included procedural statements (interviewer role, recording equipment), requests for demographic information (age, family constellations, grade in school, home address), and miscellaneous (pets, clothing, weather). When more than one content applied to a single turn, the content more likely to facilitate rapport was selected (e.g., ‘The camera is here to help me remember what you say [procedural]. So, tell me about things you like to do [hobbies/likes]’ → coded as hobbies/likes).

**Number of words.** The number of intelligible full words in every child utterance was counted.

**Reliability.** Twenty percent of the transcripts ( $n = 20$ ) were independently coded by a second coder to allow inter-coder reliability to be assessed. Ten transcripts were coded by the second coder halfway through the coding process, and another 10 were coded by the second coder during the second half of coding. Inter-rater agreement was high:  $\kappa_s = .82, .86$ , (first half) and  $\kappa_s = .84, .87$  (second half), for utterance and content, respectively.

## Results

### Preliminary Analyses

Preliminary analyses revealed no effects due to gender, so gender was excluded from the models below. Due to the non-normal distributions of the dependent variables (proportion of questions asked and average number of words elicited from children), analyses were conducted separately on the raw and log-transformed data; both sets of analyses yielded the same pattern of results. To preserve the natural state of the data and facilitate its

interpretation, analyses of raw data are reported. Bonferroni corrections were used to adjust the critical  $p$ -value for multiple comparisons. Only significant findings are reported.

### **Prevalence**

Mean proportions and frequencies of each utterance and content type are reported in Table 2. Planned comparisons (Interview Procedure) were performed for each within subjects measure (i.e., Utterance Type, Content Type) because it was not possible to conduct a factorial analysis with repeated measures across all subtypes (because values for each transcript summed to 100%).

As predicted in the first hypothesis, the NICHD Protocol interviews contained proportionally more invitations than MoGP interviews,  $t(92) = 28.85, p < .001$ , whereas MoGP interviews contained proportionally more directives, option-posing and presumptive prompts than the NICHD interviews,  $ts(92) = 12.10, 10.07, 6.02, ps < .001$ . In addition, the NICHD interviews contained proportionally more prompts about events and hobbies/likes than MoGP interviews,  $ts(92) = 10.10, 3.64, 11.78, ps = < .001$ , respectively, whereas MoGP interviews contained proportionally more prompts about other content,  $t(92) = 11.73, p < .001$ .

### **Productivity**

**Utterance type.** To examine children's productivity, a mixed model analysis of variance (ANOVA) on the average number of words children uttered in each conversational turn was performed, with Utterance Type (invitation, directive, option-posing) entered as the within-subject factor and Age Category (4- to 8- year olds, 9- to 13- year olds) entered as the between-subject factor. Because too few MoGP interviews contained invitations ( $n = 11$ ), interview procedure was not included in the productivity analyses. Because presumptive utterances and statements do not necessarily request information from children other than affirmations, they were also excluded from the productivity analyses.

There were significant main effects for Utterance Type,  $F(2, 104) = 48.12, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .48$ , and Age Category,  $F(1, 52) = 10.37, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .68$ , and an Utterance Type X Age Category interaction,  $F(2, 104) = 8.84, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .15$ . As predicted, invitations were the most productive prompts; on average, individual invitations elicited more words than directives,  $t(57) = 7.17, p < .001$ , and option-posing prompts,  $t(54) = 4.96, p < .001$ , whereas directives elicited more words than option-posing prompts,  $t(87) = 2.47, p < .001$ . Older children produced longer responses overall ( $M = 26.40, SD = 27.36$ ) than younger children ( $M = 15.61, SD = 13.98$ ).

Examination of the Utterance Type X Age Category interaction revealed that the older children produced more words in response to invitations than the younger children (older  $M = 60.13, SD = 44.89$ ; younger ( $M = 28.04, SD = 21.61$ )),  $t(57) = 3.30, p = .002$ , but they performed much like their younger peers when responding to directives (older:  $M = 9.39, SD = 9.04$ ; younger:  $M = 7.35, SD = 7.48$ ) and option-posing prompts (older:  $M = 11.15, SD = 37.98$ ; younger:  $M = 5.13, SD = 4.79$ ).

**Content type.** To test our third hypotheses, that the NICHD Protocol interviews would elicit more words in response to questions about events than the MoGP interviews, we conducted a mixed model ANOVA on the average number of words uttered in each conversational turn. Content Type (event, hobbies/likes, other) was entered as the within-subject factor and Interview Procedure (MoGP, NICHD) and Age Category (4- to 8- year olds, 9- to 13- year olds) were entered as between-subjects factors. A main effect of Content Type revealed that prompts about events elicited more words than prompts about hobbies/likes,  $t(73) = 5.50$ , and prompts about hobbies/likes elicited more words than prompts about other content,  $t(78) = 5.73, p < .001$ . However, this main effect – along with significant main effects of Age Category, Interview Procedure, and all three 2-way

interactions – were subsumed by a significant Content X Interview Procedure X Age

Category interaction,  $F(2, 138) = 5.40, p = .006, \eta_p^2 = .07$ .

In order to decompose the three-way interaction (Figure 1),  $t$  tests compared, for each age category separately, the average number of words the two procedures elicited when interviewers asked about each content type. For the younger children, the NICHD interviews contained more words in response to prompts about events than the MoGP interviews,  $t(31) = 3.45, p = .002$ . For the older children, however, prompts about events,  $t(49) = 6.40, p < .001$ , and hobbies/likes,  $t(50) = 6.32, p < .001$  elicited more words in the NICHD interviews than in the MoGP interviews.. No other significant comparisons resulted.

### Discussion

The purpose of the present study was to examine different rapport-building methods employed in investigative interviews, focusing specifically on the utterance types and conversation topics used. In accordance with our predictions, the NICHD Protocol interviews contained higher percentages of invitations and prompts about events and hobbies/likes than MoGP interviews. Invitations and event prompts were especially productive, and there were interactions with age and interview procedure. The findings demonstrate the potential advantages of building rapport by asking about past events using invitations.

The NICHD interviews contained more invitations than the MoGP interviews. The findings are consistent with those obtained in studies showing that use of the NICHD Protocol increased interview quality by increasing interviewers' reliance on open-ended prompts (Orbach, Hershkowitz, Lamb, Sternberg, Esplin, & Horowitz, 2000; Lamb et al., 2000). The fact that the MoGP interviews contained proportionally more directives, option-posing, and presumptive prompts than the NICHD interviews suggests that general guidance without close supervision can compromise the linguistic quality of prompts used early in the interview. The fact that MoGP interviews included more presumptive prompts during the

rapport building phase might reflect interviewer propensity to opine during the interviews, which was perhaps curtailed in the NICHD interviews because clearer guidance was provided.

As predicted, the NICHD interviews also contained proportionally more prompts about events and hobbies/likes than the MoGP interviews. This finding is likely attributable to the fact that the NICHD Protocol recommends a phased approach to interviewing children with these topics explicitly outlined. The fact that NICHD interviews contained both more invitations and questions about past events may enable children to produce coherent narratives, which might lead to a more sensitive assessment of children's capacities to report past events fully during rapport-building.

Our findings extend previous research examining the substantive content of children's responses, showing that invitations are more productive than more focused prompts (Brown et al., 2013; Lamb et al., 1996; Sternberg, Lamb, Orbach, Esplin, & Mitchell, 2001). Open-ended prompts were associated with longer responses (more words) during the rapport-building phase. The fact that children provided lengthy responses to invitations during rapport-building shows that children can respond to broad questions early in their interactions with interviewers. Moreover, the provision of lengthy responses to invitations highlights how invitations might be especially important during rapport-building because they can help children become comfortable being the primary speaker before substantive topics are discussed. By contrast, directive (e.g., "Where did you go?") and option-posing (e.g., "Did you see your mom?") prompts only elicit brief responses, leaving the interviewer to be the main speaker when it should be the child.

There was also evidence that older children responded more productively than younger children to invitations. This finding is consistent with research examining children's responsiveness during the substantive phase of forensic interviews which showed that

invitations elicited more details from children than yes/no prompts; specifically, 8- to 9- year-olds produced triple and 4- to 5-year olds produced double the amount of information in response to invitations than to yes/no prompts (e.g., Lamb et al., 2000). Certainly, children in both age groups benefitted from being asked invitations, but the older children may have been particularly able to access their memory and linguistic abilities to describe past experiences when asked open-ended questions.

In accordance with our predictions, prompts about events were more productive than prompts about hobbies/likes, and prompts about hobbies/likes were more productive than those about “other” topics. The finding that children were least productive in response to prompts exploring “other” contents, which largely consisted of asking about demographic information (e.g., school, family, friends), is congruent with other research showing that such inquiries do not encourage lengthy responding (Ahern et al., 2015). Memories of recent events can be richly detailed, with children able to single out the parts of the event most interesting to them for discussion with the interviewer in response to broad invitations. The fact that children in the NICHD Protocol interviews had more opportunities to respond to questions about events or hobbies/likes may have increased their comfort and familiarity in responding to such questions in detail.

Finally, content type interacted with age category and interview procedure as a predictor of children’s productivity. For the younger children, the NICHD interviews contained more than double the number of words in response to prompts about events than the MoGP interviews. For the older children, the NICHD interviews contained more words in response to both prompts about events (seven times as much) and prompts about hobbies/likes (twice as much) compared to the MoGP. Thus, it is possible that older children especially benefit from rapport building questions about events and hobbies/likes when they are given the opportunity to practice doing so.

**Limitations**

The present study was limited to child investigative interviews conducted in the United Kingdom during the late 1990s. Reviewing more recent interviews from across the globe would enhance the generalizability of our findings. Although our sample included 4-year-olds, most children were elementary school aged. Thus, it would have been helpful to also include children as young as three years of age given professional consensus that children under five are the most difficult to interview (Sternberg et al., 1997) and that younger children may be more reluctant than older children.

**Future Research**

Although researchers have examined suggestive utterances during the substantive phase of interviews (Lamb et al., 1996; Lamb et al., 2003), the extent to which interviewers presuppose information during the rapport-building phase is unknown. Interviewers' use of presumptive utterances during rapport-building might be linked to their subsequent use of biased questioning during the substantive phase. This may be especially hazardous because suggestive utterances can contaminate children's accounts (Ceci & Bruck, 1995).

Because reluctance emerges during the rapport-building phase of interviews (Ahern, Hershkowitz, Lamb, Blasbalg, & Winstanley, 2014; Lamb et al., 2008; Pipe, Orbach, Lamb, & Cederborg, 2007), the effects of prompt and content on reluctant children's responding should also be examined. The present study sample was limited to children who eventually alleged sexual abuse, thus an examination of rapport-building with children who did not disclose abuse is critical.

Moreover, researchers should attempt to identify the most appropriate utterance and contents to use when building rapport with children who have intellectual disabilities (CWID). Although the notion that children with mild intellectual disabilities require more directive prompts has been challenged by findings showing that the benefits of open-ended,

free-recall prompts extend to them, children with moderate intellectual disabilities do require greater amounts of support through more specific recall prompts and more focused questioning than other children when expanding on their initial reports (Brown, Lewis, Lamb, & Stephens, 2012). Such considerations must be addressed when developing rapport-building methods for CWID.

### **Conclusion**

Our findings suggest that the type of questions asked and the focus of those questions during the rapport-building phase can affect children's productivity. In particular, use of the NICHD Protocol enhanced children's productivity, and possibly their comfort, by eliciting longer responses via open-ended prompts about events and hobbies/likes, especially among the older children. Our findings highlight the importance of practitioners and researchers being aware of the utterance types and topics that affect children's comfort and apparent competence.

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Table 1

*Definitions of Utterance Types*

Utterance Type	Definition	Example
Invitations	Input-free utterances, including questions, statements or imperatives prompting free-recall responses from the child. Such utterances do not delimit the child’s focus except in a general way.	‘Tell me everything that happened’ or use details disclosed by the child as cues, e.g. ‘You mentioned that you went to the shops. Tell me everything about going to the shops’
Directive utterances	These refocus the child’s attention on details or aspects of the alleged incident that the child has already mentioned, providing a category for requesting additional information using ‘Wh-/How’ questions.	‘Where did you go?’, ‘How old were you?’
Option-posing utterances	These focus the child’s attention on details or aspects of the alleged incident that the child has not previously mentioned, asking the child to affirm, negate or select an investigator-given option, but do not imply that a particular response is expected. When the interviewer checks to make sure that the child has understood something that has just been said, this is also coded as option-posing.	‘Did you buy bread or milk?’, ‘I might write something down so that I can remember everything that’s been said, all right?’
Presumptive utterances	These are stated in such a way that the interviewer communicates an expected response or assumes details that have not been revealed by the child.	‘You went to the shops, didn’t you?’, Child: ‘We went to the shops’. Interviewer: ‘What kind of sweets did you buy?’
Statement	Statements were utterances where the interviewer was not necessarily requesting information from the child but a simple confirmation or assertion that the child	‘You said you went to the shops’ ‘You just had a look at the camera and now I need to ask you some questions.’

understand what the interviewer means. Statements often included informing the child about interview procedures (e.g., recording equipment) or summaries of what the child previously said.

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Table 2

*Prevalence of Utterance Types and Contents Discussed During Rapport-Building: Mean Proportion (SD) of Total Utterances in Each Category and Case Frequencies*

<b>Utterance Type</b>	<b>MOGP</b>		<b>NICHD</b>	
	Mean proportion of total utterances ( <i>SD</i> )	% (Frequency) of children with the utterance type	Mean proportion of total utterances ( <i>SD</i> )	% (Frequency) of children with the utterance type
Invitation	.01 (.02)	24% (11)	.56 (.19)	100% (48)
Directive	.41 (.15)	100% (46)	.16 (.08)	98% (48)
Option-posing	.34 (.13)	98% (45)	.13 (.09)	92% (44)
Presumptive	.11 (.09)	83% (38)	.03 (.03)	46% (22)
Statement	.14 (.09)	96% (44)	.13 (.12)	81% (39)
<b>Content</b>				
Event	.19 (.16)	78% (36)	.53 (.17)	100% (48)
Hobbies/Likes	.12 (.15)	67% (32)	.22 (.10)	100% (48)
Other	.69 (.20)	100% (46)	.25 (.16)	98% (47)

Table 3

*Productivity (Number of Words) of Utterance Types and Contents Discussed During Rapport-Building: Mean (and SD) in Each Category and Case Frequencies*

	<b>MoGP</b>		<b>NICHD</b>		<b>Total</b>	
<b>Utterance Type</b>	Mean per type (SD)	% (Frequency) of children with the utterance type	Mean per type (SD)	% (Frequency) of children with the utterance type	Mean per type (SD)	% (Frequency) of children with the utterance type
Invitation	11.55 (14.24)	24 (11)	54.55 (39.67)	100 (48)	46.53 (39.94)	64 (59)
Directive	7.75 (5.72)	100 (46)	9.43 (10.52)	98 (47)	8.60 (8.49)	99 (93)
Option-posing	5.13 (3.48)	98 (45)	12.65 (42.48)	92 (44)	8.85 (30.04)	95 (89)
<b>Content Type</b>						
Events	7.86 (6.19)	78 (36)	56.72 (46.1)	100 (48)	35.78 (42.56)	9 (84)
Hobbies/Likes	7.32 (5.44)	70 (32)	19.6 (10.35)	100 (48)	14.69 (10.59)	85 (80)
Other	5.12 (2.82)	100 (46)	7.15 (10.13)	98 (47)	6.14 (7.50)	99 (93)

Figure 1.

*Mean Productivity (Number of Words) of Content Types Asked by Interviewers During Rapport-Building by Age Category and Interviewing Procedure*

