

\$11 MILLION GRANT

Helps Elicit the Truth

By Laura L. Acosta
Photo by Laura Trejo



In the United States, false confessions and incriminating statements lead to wrongful convictions in approximately 25 percent of cases, according to the Innocence Project, a national litigation and public policy organization dedicated to exonerating wrongfully convicted people through DNA testing.

A team of world-renowned investigators led by Christian Meissner, Ph.D., associate professor of psychology and criminal justice at UTEP, is developing new methods of collecting information from cooperative and uncooperative witnesses by improving investigative interview practices.

Meissner and Harmon Hosch, Ph.D., a psychology professor, received an \$11.5 million grant from the High Value Detainee Interrogation Group and the Federal Bureau of Investigation to fund the project, "Intelligence, Interviewing and Interrogation."

The five-year study looks to identify, understand and develop strong, reliable, evidence-based approaches that improve investigators' interviewing capabilities, Hosch said.

According to Meissner, the research explores behavior in interviews by trying to understand how people provide information and under what conditions they are willing to provide information.

In doing so, investigators seek to create interrogation approaches for intelligence agencies that maximize the likelihood of eliciting accurate information.

Now in its second year, research is under way in three areas: elicitation, interrogation and credibility assessment.

Interviewers use elicitation to get the most information from an interview.

Meissner uses mnemonics or techniques that can help jog a person's memory to elicit information from a witness about a certain incident. In one scenario, the interrogator may ask the witness to mentally travel back in time to the location where they acquired the information and think about the context in which they acquired the information.

"There are a number of other mnemonics that will work, and some of it depends on the type of information that you're trying to

elicit," Meissner said.

In the area of interrogation, investigators are leveraging what they know about social psychology and human behavior to develop methods that lead to cooperation.

Researchers are looking at social influence tactics that are effective in persuading non-cooperative witnesses to comply during an interrogation.

By conducting studies in the University's Investigative Interviewing Research Laboratory, researchers have found that aggressive or manipulative tactics do not produce the best information. Instead, techniques that develop rapport with the interviewee lead to the best information.

"The question is, how can we interrogate them in a way that obtains cooperation from them and induces them to be willing to share that information?" Meissner said.

The third area deals with how an interviewer can determine if the witness is telling the truth or lying.

According to Meissner, interrogation approaches that produce anxiety tend to have negative effects on credibility assessment. On the other hand, rapport-based approaches to interviewing and interrogation actually enhance credibility assessment judgments because they effectively elicit cues to deception that are present in those who lie, but not present in those who tell the truth.

Another study by James Wood, Ph.D., UTEP professor of psychology, looks at the factors that influence the accuracy of information when interviews are conducted through an interpreter. Findings show that information is lost because of selective editing and memory loss. The study also found that it becomes more difficult for interrogators to build rapport with the interviewee through an interpreter.

In addition to the research conducted at



Christian Meissner, Ph.D.

POSITION:

EDUCATION:

HOBBIES:

I CHOSE MY CAREER BECAUSE ...

MY GREATEST INSPIRATION IS ...

THE BEST PART OF MY JOB IS ...



Christian Meissner, Ph.D., is the co-editor of *Police Interrogations and False Confessions: Current Research, Practice, and Policy Recommendations*, along with G. Daniel Lassiter, Ph.D. Meissner is serving as a visiting scientist and program director of Law and Social Sciences at the National Science Foundation through July 31, 2012.

UTEP, the grant is funding projects at 14 institutions throughout the world. They include the University at Albany SUNY; Florida International University; Roger Williams University in Rhode Island; the University of Portsmouth, England; the University of Gothenburg, Sweden; and Charles Sturt University, Australia.

"There are a growing number of scholars who are looking at interviewing and interrogation in the criminal and intelligence context, and what we've done is to identify the leading scholars in this area across geographical boundaries," Meissner said.

Hosch and Meissner hope that the "Intelligence, Interviewing and Interrogation" project will generate new knowledge about how humans interact

under interrogation and also change how interrogation is done by developing and implementing new methods.

Researchers are working with federal training centers, federal law enforcement offices and U.S. government entities that conduct interrogations and interviews.

"The idea is that we start in the lab. We move to the training facilities to do some replication and extension of the lab work, then we move it into training and doctrine, and then we study it out in the field," Meissner said.

Funding is also helping to support a master's student, six Ph.D. students, and two postdoctoral researchers, and a multitude of undergraduate students – the next generation of researchers, Hosch said. ➤



Harmon Hosch, Ph.D.

POSITION:

Helen M.C. & J. Edward Stern Professor of Psychology

EDUCATION:

Ph.D. in Social and Personality Psychology, The New School for Social Research

HOBBIES:

Traveling, reading, photography and building model ships

I CHOSE MY CAREER BECAUSE ...

my wife, Jeanne, and I decided that the freedom to research what I wanted to focus on was of greater value to us than the higher earning potential we had working on others' research projects in the government and private domains.

MY GREATEST INSPIRATION IS ...

I take joy in others' success, particularly when I have been able to work in the background to facilitate that success.

THE BEST PART OF MY JOB IS ...

designing studies to understand human social interactions better and watching my students mature in their scientific development.