

# POST-INTERVIEW REFLECTIONS

One of SJAC's policies is to request that Documentation Coordinators write reflections following the interview process. After an interaction with a victim/witness, it is normal to leave with strong impressions about the interview. You might feel particularly moved, they might have said something you want to verify, or you might have overall doubts about the truth of their statements. The sooner you write impressions, the fresher they will be in your mind. Your impressions can serve as a reminder to yourself later, can help others gain insight into your state of mind after the interview, and can contribute to SJAC's ability to assess the reliability of the documentation.

## Assessing Credibility

Consistency is one of the most essential aspects of assessing credibility and should be recorded in the post-interview reflection. There are three types of consistency that you should consider:

- **Internal consistency (objective)** refers to whether the victim/witness provided consistent facts throughout the interview. (e.g., if the interviewee first says that the incident took place in solitary confinement and later says that three other detainees were present, then there is a problem with internal consistency.)
- **External consistency (objective)** refers to whether the interviewee's facts match known, verifiable facts, such as news reports. (e.g., if the interviewee says the incident took place on a sunny day, but weather reports indicate there was a big blizzard at that time, there is an external consistency problem.)
- **Plausibility or apparent reasonableness (subjective)** refers to your own sense of whether the testimony seems reasonable based on your knowledge and experience conducting interviews on similar topics. (e.g., if the interviewee says a Japanese officer gave orders in the facility to torture detainees, that fact might seem implausible if no other interviewees or media reports have ever said that Japan is involved in the conflict.)

## What Type of Information Should I Reflect On?

In addition to the internal and external consistencies explained above, you should also focus on the following during your post-interview reflection:

- **Level of detail** – generally, a victim/witness should be able to provide substantial detail about firsthand experiences. If s/he cannot, even when you press for more information, this is something to reflect upon.
- **Challenging questions** – how does the victim/witness respond to difficult questions and do they remain consistent even when you ask similar questions in different ways?
- **Biases** – everyone has biases, but certain biases might cause someone to exaggerate the harm they suffered. If you sense discernible bias during the interview, it is important to point this out in the reflection.
- **Confidence** – whether s/he responds to questions with confidence should be included in the reflection.
- **Corroboration** – if the victim/witness is able to

corroborate the testimony with photos, videos, documents, or names of other witnesses who can be interviewed, this can be a factor in your post-interview reflection.

- **Emotional responses** – you should not expect everyone to cry when they describe torture, but people will usually exhibit some emotional responses, whether it is sadness, anger, or dark humor. Record these responses, including whether you thought their emotional responses were out of the ordinary. If you are conducting the interview over a call, you may not be able to see the respondent’s face, but you can comment upon the intonation of their voice and other types of cues.

note these signs, but you should not use it as a basis to judge the truthfulness or falsehood of testimony.

- Victim/witness recollection is inherently unreliable. Even if someone is not lying, it is human nature to forget details of events, especially if the event happened long ago. Science shows that our brains often fill in gaps for lost memory, leading people to misremember and mischaracterize even basic facts. This is also why it is important not to ask leading questions. Memories are incredibly suggestive, and the victim/witness might unconsciously use the version of facts stated in the question to replace their own lost memories.

## Certainty is Impossible

Your job is to explain WHY you did or did not believe a victim’s account of events. Your job is NOT to give definitive judgment on whether something was true. Certainty is impossible, and it is ultimately up to a judge to make the final determination. An inconsistent interview with low level of detail does not necessarily mean the victim/witness was purposefully lying. There are other explanations. For example:

- Victims may have experienced substantial trauma. Torture, sexual violence, and the death or suffering of others can leave marks on a person’s memory and cause difficulty recalling details or proper time sequences. Memory gaps and confusion could easily be mistaken for lying. Through experience and training, you should be able to identify signs of trauma, but the exact reason for inconsistencies is still difficult to ascertain.
- Ordinarily, we give more credence to people who express themselves with confidence. These are usually signs that a person is telling the truth. However, due to gender dynamics or trauma, a victim/witness may act shy or hesitant. Their voice might be shaky, and they might feel uncomfortable. It is important to

## Timing and Length of Reflections

The sooner you write down your reflections, the better. If you have time in the interview room, after the victim/witness leaves, then spend a few minutes reflecting. If not, then be sure to write down your reflections later at home, the same day as the interview. You should not spend more than 30 minutes, and five to six sentences are sufficient. But you might want to write more if you have several impressions and/or there were many inconsistencies in the testimony.