

UNCOVER THE TRUTH: ETHICAL PRINCIPLES AND HUMAN INTELLIGENCE INTERROGATION

Adnan Fazlić¹

University of Sarajevo, Faculty of Criminal Justice and Security Studies

Irma Deljković²

University of Sarajevo, Faculty of Criminal Justice and Security Studies

Abstract: Humans are pivotal intelligence sources, making interrogations and interviews central to human intelligence (HUMINT) collections. Throughout history, intelligence operatives have often resorted to harsh interrogation methods—utilising physical coercion or psychological manipulations—to break down the resistance of the subject, gain cooperation, and obtain crucial strategic information vital to national security. These methods, which are typically based on observational learning and peer experiences, emphasise immediate outcomes over intelligence accuracy. Nevertheless, as contemporary security challenges grow increasingly intricate, the need for accurate and operationally useful information calls for a fundamental shift towards more efficient and ethical human intelligence (HUMINT) strategies. In this paper, we examine intelligence interrogation through the lens of the Principles on Effective Interviewing for Investigations and Information Gathering (the ‘Méndez Principles’) and highlight the role of these principles in the transition from the coercive to non-coercive, evidence-based approach to HUMINT interrogation. Accordingly, we investigated the possible effects of this transition on improving the effectiveness and ethical standards of HUMINT operations. Finally, we identify key challenges for future research and propose directions to address gaps in current knowledge, advancing the science of ethical intelligence gathering.

Keywords: HUMINT, interrogation, intelligence gathering, ethical approach, Méndez principles

Introduction

Intelligence information gathered to inform national-security decision are typically collected by a country’s intelligence services, law-enforcement agencies, or armed forces, depending on its security system organisation. Although technological innovations—from geographic information systems in the 1980s to today’s Geospatial Intelligence (GEOINT), Social Media Intelligence (SOCMINT), and Cyber Intelligence (CYBINT)—have vastly expanded collection methods (Henrico and Putter, 2024), Human Intelligence (HUMINT) retains its unique value in delivering the nuanced, context-rich insights that machines alone cannot provide (Moffett et al., 2021; Margolis, 2013; Ahmed, 2022). Effective HUMINT hinges on expert interview and interrogation practices, robust collection management, and disciplined analysis

¹ Contact address: afazlic@fkn.unsa.ba.

² Contact address: ideljkic@fkn.unsa.ba.

(Steele, 2010; Nunan et al., 2020a). Yet despite a rich body of work on criminal-justice interrogations, the specific dynamics of military and intelligence questioning—especially in cross-cultural and high-stakes environments—remain underexplored (Russano et al., 2014; Hartwig, Meissner and Semel, 2014). Language barriers, cultural misunderstandings, and interpreter reliability can further complicate rapport-building, persuasion, and credibility assessment, heightening the risk of error or deception (Kovacs, 1997; Skolnick & Leo, 1992).

Against this backdrop, the ethics and efficacy of coercive interrogation tactics have come under sustained critique. A wealth of empirical studies demonstrates that torture, ill-treatment, and undue pressure not only breach international law but also undermine intelligence quality—prompting sources to fabricate or tailor responses to appease interrogators (Méndez and Drummond, 2021; Brecher, 2017). In contrast, rapport-based approaches grounded in human rights and procedural safeguards yield more reliable, detailed accounts (Walsh, Areh and Bull, 2025). Reflecting this knowledge, the UN Special Rapporteur’s 2016 report urged the adoption of a universal protocol mandating non-coercive interviewing standards across all law-enforcement, military, and intelligence bodies (Bull, 2023). Building on that mandate, the UN Steering Committee on Effective Interviewing adopted the Principles on Effective Interviewing for Investigations and Information Gathering (known as the Méndez Principles) in 2021 to replace adversarial, coercive interrogation tactics with a structured, rapport-based framework (United Nations Steering Committee on Effective Interviewing, 2021)—a response to ongoing reports of prohibited interrogation practices despite clear global bans (Méndez, 2021).

Although these evidence-based standards have gained traction in some jurisdictions, a systematic assessment of their global uptake, practical application, and measurable impact on HUMINT operations is still lacking. Key questions include which legal and procedural safeguards have been adopted into national policies and training curricula, how rapport-based interviewing methods influence both information quality and source welfare across diverse cultural and operational settings, and what obstacles continue to impede full implementation. Accordingly, this paper aims to: (1) examine HUMINT interrogation through the lens of the Méndez Principles, tracing the evolution from coercive tactics to an evidence-based, non-coercive framework, (2) investigate the practical effects of this paradigm shift, exploring how the transition impacts both practitioner performance and source cooperation; (3) assess the role of the principles in enhancing operational effectiveness and upholding ethical standards, by evaluating their influence on the quality of intelligence and the treatment of sources; and (4) identify key challenges and proposes directions for future research, to address gaps in current knowledge and further advance the science of ethical intelligence gathering.

Evolution of Human Intelligence Interrogation: From Coercive Methods to Rapport-Based HUMINT Practices

Human intelligence collection remains indispensable to national-security decision making, often filling gaps left by technical means such as signals or imagery intelligence (Hartwig, Meissner and Semel, 2014). As a result, intelligence agencies have long placed interrogation at the centre of their HUMINT tradecraft. Historically, the systematic recruitment, handling, and debriefing of human sources hinged on confrontational methods designed to overcome resistance and extract critical information (Rejali, 2007). Yet the legacy of torture and coercion—dating back to rack-and-torture medieval inquisitions and early-modern

witch trials—has been fraught with ethical transgressions and operational failures (Alison et al., 2021b). Over centuries, authoritarian regimes and colonial powers perfected increasingly sophisticated techniques, only to discover that brutalizing detainees often undermined the very intelligence services that sanctioned such tactics (Rumney, 2006).

In fact, in the 16th century, European judicial systems institutionalized torture as routine procedure, employing rack devices, strappado, and water asphyxiation to force confessions in heresy and espionage cases (Alison et al., 2021b; Rumney, 2006). Such methods persisted well into the 19th century, endorsed by both civil and military authorities as incontrovertibly effective. Yet even then, field intelligence officers began to notice weaknesses in coercion. During World War I, reports surfaced that information obtained under duress frequently proved partial, misleading, or entirely fabricated (Vrij et al., 2017). These early misgivings crystallized during World War II, when the Gestapo's system of beatings, electric shocks, and isolation yielded few reliable leads and instead fostered resentment, false narratives, and hardened resistance (Rumney, 2006). Parallel dynamics played out in the Soviet sphere. the Soviet Secret Police (NKVD) interrogators employed sleep deprivation, needle punctures beneath fingernails, and positional torments in an effort to dismantle dissent (Rejali, 2007). Although these tactics could break an individual's will, they produced little verifiable intelligence and frequently induced detainees to concoct stories simply to end their suffering. The same pattern emerged across Europe, from Hungary and Romania to Italy and Poland, underscoring that coercion tends to undermine trust and degrade information quality.

During the mid-20th century, colonial powers applied their home-grown coercive repertoires with ruthless efficiency abroad. French forces deployed the "torture à l'aimant" electric-pain method in Vietnam and Algeria, while British counterinsurgency in Cyprus during the 1950s relied on punitive beatings and confrontational interviews (Alison et al., 2021b). In Latin America, military juntas in Brazil and Argentina institutionalized "disappearance squads" whose brutality not only violated human rights but also seeded corruption and factional rivalries within intelligence services. Darius Rejali later described the Brazilian military's systematic torture of dissidents as a "devolutionary spiral," in which each act of brutality eroded trust among security personnel and contracted the state's capacity to gather actionable intelligence (Rejali, 2007). By the late 20th century, an international tide was turning. Growing scrutiny of human-rights abuses—fuelled by United Nations conventions, NGOs, and investigative journalism—prompted many states to temper their most overtly violent methods (Waldron, 2018). Yet rather than abandon coercion outright, agencies refined it. The CIA's 1963 KUBARK Counterintelligence Interrogation Manual, for example, quietly embraced "clean" torture: sleep deprivation, sensory overload, and immobilizing stress positions left few visible scars while inflicting severe psychological strain (Kleinman, 2006; Gordon and Fleisher, 2019). Although KUBARK's architects acknowledged that rapport, not cruelty, ultimately yielded results—advising interrogators to scale back stressors once cooperation began—they continued to sanction a suite of psychological torments that would reappear in later "enhanced interrogation" programs (Gordon and Fleisher, 2019; McCoy, 2012).

After the September 11, 2001 attacks, U.S. policymakers reignited debates over the legality and morality of "enhanced interrogation techniques." High-level memoranda from the Office of Legal Counsel granted the CIA latitude to employ methods including waterboarding, cramped confinement, and prolonged isolation (McCoy, 2006). When detainee-abuse scandals at Abu Ghraib and Guantánamo Bay emerged, career military and FBI interrogators publicly

decried these measures, warning that they produced unreliable confessions, jeopardized treaty obligations, and alienated allies (Stampnitzky, 2020; Rumney, 2006). Meanwhile, psychologists and criminologists published studies demonstrating that stress and pain impair recall, trigger confabulation, and incentivize detainees to offer misleading narratives simply to end their suffering (Vrij et al., 2017; Snook et al., 2020).

This mounting evidence spurred interest in alternative methodologies. Behavioural-science research coalesced around what became known as the information-gathering or rapport-based approach. Grounded in social-psychological theories of cooperation, memory, and persuasion, this model posits that sources are more inclined to provide accurate, comprehensive intelligence when they perceive interrogators as empathic, respectful, and genuinely invested in their welfare (Hartwig, Meissner and Semel, 2014). Cognitive interviewing techniques—originally developed for eyewitness testimony—emphasize open-ended questions, mental reinstatement of context, and minimal interruptions, all within a neutral, non-threatening environment (Milne & Bull, 1999). Institutional uptake of these methods yielded promising results. The FBI, for example, adopted rapport-based debriefings during counterterrorism investigations, securing actionable leads from high-value detainees like Abu Zubaydah before any harsh interrogation was attempted (McCoy, 2012; Goodman-Delahunty and Martschuk, 2018). Observing such successes, the United Kingdom formalized a new framework in the early 1990s: the PEACE model, subsequently adopted across Commonwealth countries (Bull and Milne, 2020; Bull, 2023). PEACE—Preparation and Planning; Engage and Explain; Account; Closure; Evaluate—eschews deception and coercion in favour of transparency and collaboration. Practitioners prepare thoroughly, explain the process to sources, encourage free-narrative responses, and then evaluate reliability based on consistency rather than intimidation (Meissner, Kelly and Woestehoff, 2015; Kelly, Dawson and Hartwig, 2019). Longitudinal studies of PEACE-trained officers demonstrate reductions in false confessions and improvements in information accuracy, underscoring the approach's operational value (Meissner, Kelly & Woestehoff, 2015).

Building on PEACE's success, scholars developed other frameworks that integrate ethical safeguards with tactical rigor. The ORBIT (Observing Rapport Based Interpersonal Technique) model blends motivational-interviewing principles—emphasizing autonomy and empathy—with procedural safeguards from the Standard Interviewing Method, thus balancing the imperative to elicit critical intelligence with respect for legal norms (Alison et al., 2014; Powell & Brubacher, 2020). Field trials indicate that ORBIT practitioners obtain more detailed, verifiable information than those using adversarial styles (Alison et al., 2014). Across these innovations, empirical meta-analyses have consistently demonstrated the superiority of rapport-based over coercive methods. Vrij et al. (2017) synthesized decades of research to conclude that stress-inducing tactics impair memory retrieval, increase cognitive load, and provoke resistance or deception. By contrast, information-gathering techniques—characterized by evidence presentation, active listening, and positive reinforcement of cooperative behaviour—significantly enhance recall and willingness to volunteer unsought details (Vrij et al., 2017; Brimbal et al., 2020). Additionally, Goodman-Delahunty and Martschuk (2018) found that non-coercive approaches yielded reliable information nearly twice as often as coercive ones, with detainees six times more likely to cooperate when treated respectfully.

Beyond effectiveness, the shift toward rapport-based models reflects an ethical imperative. Torture and coercion violate international human-rights treaties—including the UN

Convention Against Torture—and degrade the moral standing of democratic intelligence services (Waldron, 2018). They also risk institutional corruption: historical programs like the CIA’s Phoenix initiative demonstrate how incentives for short-term “results” can drive unchecked brutality, factionalism, and cover-ups (McCoy, 2006; Jacobson, 2021). Embedding ethical interrogation frameworks within legal mandates, oversight committees, and training curricula guards against such drift, ensuring accountability to democratic principles and international norms (Schlag, 2019; Kryuchkov, 2020). Moreover, fair treatment of sources has operational dividends. Human assets who perceive respectful handling are more likely to sustain cooperation, serve as repeat informants, and recommend additional contacts (Lutz & Sikkink, 2001). Conversely, reports of mistreatment can undermine entire HUMINT pipelines, prompting asset defections and discouraging potential collaborators (Surmon-Böhr et al., 2021).

An additional consideration concerns vulnerable populations. Individuals with cognitive impairments or acute stress reactions are especially susceptible to suggestibility and false confession under coercion (Drizin and Leo, 2004; Tribbels and Michels, 2024). Ethical interrogators must therefore tailor techniques—slowing pace, simplifying language, allowing rest intervals—to accommodate these needs, safeguarding rights and preserving intelligence integrity. Looking ahead, intelligence agencies should formalize the integration of behavioural scientists and legal experts into HUMINT teams. Embedding psychologists, sociologists, and human-rights lawyers within operational units creates continuous feedback loops, allowing interrogation protocols to be refined in light of emerging research and evolving legal standards (El-Khoury, Haidar and Barkil-Oteo, 2020). Ongoing field experiments that compare diverse interview strategies in realistic contexts can further sharpen understanding of which rapport-building elements most strongly predict accurate disclosures (Granhag et al., 2020).

In sum, the arc of interrogation has bent away from visible, violent torture toward discreet psychological pressure and, increasingly, toward fully ethical, rapport-based information gathering. Historical experience illustrates that coercion breeds falsehood and mistrust, whereas collaborative approaches cultivate trust, yield, and institutional legitimacy. For today’s intelligence agencies, embracing evidence-based, human-centred interrogation models is both a moral imperative and an operational necessity. By codifying non-coercive frameworks, investing in behavioural-science research, and embedding robust oversight, agencies can maximize HUMINT effectiveness while honouring international human-rights commitments (Bull, 2023). This evolution—rooted in principle and pragmatism—offers the surest path to securing reliable intelligence, maintaining public trust, and upholding the rule of law in an increasingly complex global landscape.

Ethical Principles for HUMINT Interrogation

The absolute, unequivocal ban on torture and other cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment is enshrined in international law, yet it remains too often honoured more in the breach than in practice (Brecher, 2017). This prohibition is not merely a legal formality; it embodies the core principle that even forceful measures must respect human dignity, and that the rule of law itself must never be brutal in operation (Waldron, 2018). In the realm of human-intelligence (HUMINT) interrogation, these ethical and legal imperatives demand a fundamentally different approach—one grounded in science, rights, and professionalism—that both yields reliable information and upholds our shared values. At the heart of this shift lies the concept of procedural justice, which research shows is essential to building trust and

legitimacy between interrogator and sources. Procedural justice rests on four pillars: treating people with dignity and respect; giving them a genuine “voice” during interactions; making decisions in a neutral, transparent fashion; and conveying honest, benevolent motives (Etienne and McAdams, 2021). When sources experience these qualities firsthand, they are far more likely to perceive the process as fair—and to respond with candid, comprehensive disclosures.

Closely linked to procedural justice is rapport—the collaborative, respectful relationship that allows investigators to manage a source’s motivations and welfare while clarifying the mutual purpose of the dialogue (Nunan et al., 2020c). Psychological science has validated rapport-based methods as the gold standard for eliciting cooperation. For instance, Motivational Interviewing techniques enhance conversational rapport by fostering empathy and autonomy, while targeted social-influence tactics and conceptual priming help overcome resistance without coercion (Meissner et al., 2017; Vrij et al., 2017). A key mechanism in rapport building is reciprocity, which transforms the exchange into a two-way street of empathy, genuineness, and trust (Brimbal et al., 2020). Simple gestures—sharing non-incriminating information, acknowledging difficulties, or demonstrating genuine concern—signal to the source that the interrogator is worthy of trust. In turn, the source is more inclined to reciprocate with truthful, detailed information.

Perspective-taking and perspective-getting are further cornerstones of effective interviewing. By deliberately striving to understand the source’s worldview—questions they ask themselves, concerns they harbour, and emotional states they experience—interrogators lay the groundwork for open dialogue. Indeed, seasoned practitioners know that seeking to understand a person before seeking to be understood is the hallmark of ethical, effective interrogation (Snook et al., 2020). Underlying all these relational strategies is a firm grounding in cognitive and behavioural science, including insights from neuroscience. Human memory is both powerful and fragile, and well-designed interviews must account for the ways stress, suggestion, and context influence recall (Vrij et al., 2017). Open-ended questions—not leading or closed prompts—consistently account for the majority of reliable intelligence yield, while minimizing distortion (Nunan et al., 2020b; Bull and Milne, 2020).

Yet even the best principles will falter without two essential pillars: ability and integrity. Ability encompasses the specific skills and competencies—active listening, adaptive questioning, empathy—that investigators must master. Integrity reflects the unwavering commitment to adhere to ethical standards in both word and deed (Brimbal et al., 2020). Together, these pillars ensure that science-based techniques are applied faithfully, rather than watered down or ignored. Contextual sensitivity further sharpens effectiveness. Socio-cultural awareness—understanding the norms, languages, and power dynamics of each source—allows investigators to tailor pacing, phrasing, and setting in ways that feel natural and respectful (Hope et al., 2021). Moreover, identifying and accommodating individual vulnerabilities—medical conditions, psychological stressors, cultural taboos—protects rights and enhances the authenticity of what the source is willing and able to share (Deljić and Fazlić, 2023; Shaeffer, Hinestroza and Tait, 2023).

Despite broad agreement on these standards, real-world compliance remains uneven. Even investigators trained in modern, non-coercive methods sometimes revert to outdated habits—closed questions, subtle pressure, or worse—undermining both ethics and efficacy (Bull and Milne, 2020). Embedding ethical interviewing principles into everyday practice—through policies, performance metrics, and leadership modelling—is therefore essential to

sustain progress (Williamson, 1993). This need gave rise to the Méndez Principles. In 2016, UN Special Rapporteur on Torture Professor Juan E. Méndez called for a formal protocol that would reconcile investigative needs with human-rights obligations, ensuring that interviews remain both truthful and dignified (Méndez, 2021). By May 2021, the “Principles on Effective Interviewing for Investigations and Information Gathering” were endorsed by the UN Expert Committee, backed by leading anti-torture organizations and the Norwegian Centre for Human Rights (Anti-Torture Initiative, Association for the Prevention of Torture and the Norwegian Centre for Human Rights, 2021; Méndez and Ilsey, 2023). Around eighty experts from forty countries contributed, reflecting a truly global consensus (Demirden, 2023).

The Méndez Principles prescribe six core pillars (United Nations Steering Committee on Effective Interviewing, 2021):

1. **Foundations.** Interviewing must rest on rigorous scientific research, established legal norms, and professional ethics, rejecting brute-force tactics in favour of rapport-based methods proven to yield reliable intelligence.
2. **Practice.** Effective interviewing is a holistic, evidence-driven process. Investigators prepare meticulously, grasp the case context, prioritize truth-seeking over confessions, and tailor their approach to each individual—all while rigorously respecting procedural safeguards and allowing sources to speak freely.
3. **Vulnerability.** Early identification and accommodation of each person’s specific risks—medical, psychological, cultural, or situational—both protects human rights and enhances the accuracy of disclosures.
4. **Training.** High-quality interviewing requires structured, ongoing education in validated techniques such as the PEACE model, along with regular professional development to integrate the latest findings into daily practice.
5. **Accountability.** Ethical interviewing demands institutional transparency: published policies, independent oversight, unannounced inspections, and accessible complaint mechanisms deter misconduct and reinforce ethical norms.
6. **Implementation.** A supportive legal and institutional framework—clear legislation, dedicated resources, cross-sector collaboration, and consistent, “actions-not-words” application—is vital to transform principles into standard practice.

Empirical evidence now confirms that these non-coercive approaches outperform coercion in both reliability and legality. Information-gathering methods framed by the Méndez Principles elicit statements and confessions with far greater diagnostic value than those induced by force (Kassin et al., 2025; Launay, Brunel and Bull, 2022). Innovative models like ORBIT, which integrate humanistic counselling with interpersonal theory, further demonstrate how person-centred strategies can thrive even when interviewing high-stakes intelligence sources (Alison et al., 2021a). Likewise, the Shift-of-Strategy approach uses a credibility-fo-

cused social environment to motivate honesty and manage evidence-statement inconsistencies, expanding the toolkit of rapport-based techniques (Luke and Granhag, 2022).

Ultimately, adhering to ethical interrogation principles is not a luxury—it is a strategic imperative. By centring human dignity, harnessing the best of cognitive and social science, and enforcing robust oversight, intelligence agencies secure both superior intelligence and enduring legitimacy. As Professor Méndez stressed, moving from aspirational standards to everyday practice—turning principles into action—is the defining step toward interrogation that is both morally sound and operationally effective (Méndez, 2021).

Discussion

The historical use of coercive interrogation methods, including torture, psychological manipulation, and physical duress, has been extensively documented in intelligence practices, spanning from medieval enquiries to contemporary conflicts (Rejali, 2007). However, evidence has indicated that these methods are both ethically indispensable and operationally ineffective. Research demonstrates that coercion often results in false confessions and unreliable intelligence as subjects may fabricate information to alleviate their distress (Rumney, 2006; Vrij et al., 2017). For instance, Gestapo’s brutal tactics during World War II produced little actionable intelligence, while the CIA’s Phoenix Program in Vietnam led to corruption and unreliable confessions (McCoy 2006).

In contrast, ethical rapport-based approaches, as advocated by the Méndez Principles, emphasise human rights, procedural justice, and cooperation. These principles promote non-coercion, respect, and structured interviewing techniques, aligning with psychological research on memory and persuasion (Meissner et al., 2014; Vrij et al., 2017). Studies on effectiveness support this shift: Goodman-Delahunty and Martschuk (2018) found that non-coercive strategies elicited cooperation in 56% of cases and reliable information in nearly 50%, significantly outperforming coercive methods. Case studies further highlight this advantage. The FBI’s interrogation of Abu Zubaydah using rapport-based techniques obtained actionable intelligence without resorting to “enhanced interrogation” (McCoy, 2012), demonstrating that ethical methods succeed where coercion fails.

The Méndez Principles offer a framework that combines scientific rigor with ethical standards, focusing on preparation, vulnerability assessment, and rapport building (United Nations Steering Committee on Effective Interviewing, 2021). This method not only minimises the risk of false confessions, but also encourages genuine cooperation, thereby improving the quality and reliability of intelligence. By treating sources with dignity and employing cognitive interviewing techniques such as open-ended questions and minimal interruptions, interrogators can elicit detailed, context-rich disclosures that coercive tactics cannot achieve (Milne and Bull, 1999).

The transition to ethical interrogation practices has significant implications for the reliability of intelligence, public trust and global compliance. Reliable intelligence forms the foundation of national security and ethical methods consistently yield more accurate and actionable information (Goodman-Delahunty and Martschuk, 2018). In contrast to coercion, which obscures truth with falsehoods, rapport-based techniques ensure that intelligence remains trustworthy for strategic decision making. Furthermore, public trust, a vital asset, is reinforced by ethical practice. Intelligence agencies rely on the legitimacy and cooperation of both domestic and international partners. Coercive methods, as evidenced by scandals such

as Guantánamo Bay, undermine this trust by alienating both allies and citizens (Stampnitzky, 2020). By contrast, ethical interrogation aligns with democratic values and human rights, promoting goodwill and collaboration (Lutz and Sikkink, 2001). This trust yields operational benefits; sources treated with respect are more likely to cooperate in the long term and even recruit others (Nunan et al., 2020c).

On a global scale, ethical practices ensure adherence to standards, such as the UN Convention against Torture, thereby strengthening the moral and legal foundations of intelligence agencies (Waldron, 2018). This adherence is not merely a legal obligation, but also a strategic benefit, as it helps prevent diplomatic conflicts and sustains credibility at the international stage. Collectively, these considerations highlight that ethical interrogation is not just a moral decision but also a pragmatic one, enhancing both effectiveness and legitimacy. Although evidence supports ethical methods, controversies persist, especially regarding the use of limited coercion in extreme situations like the “ticking bomb” scenario. Advocates contend that, in rare, urgent cases, coercive tactics may be warranted to prevent catastrophic threats (Bagaric and Clarke, 2005). This debate intensified after 9/11, with the CIA’s “enhanced interrogation” program being portrayed as a necessary evil.

However, this stance has been fundamentally flawed. Firstly, the “ticking bomb” scenario is an anomaly, frequently used to justify broader coercive practices (Rumney, 2006). Second, empirical evidence indicates that coercion remains unreliable, even under duress. Stress and pain can impair memory and encourage falsehood, potentially delaying crucial responses (Brecher, 2017). Alison et al. (2014) challenge this by showing that rapport-based techniques are effective in high-stakes situations, reducing resistance and eliciting truth from terrorists without compromising ethics. The advantage of ethical methods lies in their consistency; they provide reliable outcomes without the moral and operational risks associated with coercion. Thus, even in extreme cases, ethical principles emerge as both right and smart.

Although the argument for ethical interrogation is compelling, there are still notable research gaps. A major limitation is the scarcity of data in various cultural contexts. Intelligence operations are conducted worldwide; however, most research concentrates on Western environments, neglecting the impact of cultural norms on the effectiveness of interrogation (Hope et al., 2021). For example, the process of building rapport may vary between collectivist and individualist societies, necessitating customised approaches. Another under-explored area is the role of technology. Tools such as AI for credibility assessment and virtual reality for training have the potential to revolutionise ethical interrogation; however, research in this field is still in its infancy (Jacobson, 2021; Vrij et al., 2017). The long-term effects of ethical methods on both sources and interrogators have been insufficiently studied, leaving questions regarding sustainability and psychological impact unanswered (Granhag et al., 2020). Future research should prioritise cross-cultural studies, technological integration, and longitudinal analyses to refine and validate ethical practices across diverse operational landscapes.

Recommendations

Intelligence agencies should implement evidence-based training programs that emphasise ethical techniques such as rapport building and cultural sensitivity. These programs, grounded in psychological research, should impart skills, such as active listening, open-ended questioning, and vulnerability assessment (Meissner et al., 2015). Regular updates

with new findings will ensure that training remains cutting-edge, equipping interrogators to handle diverse sources effectively and ethically. To instil ethical standards, agencies should implement strong oversight mechanisms such as independent review boards and transparent reporting systems. These measures ensure accountability and prevent regression in coercive practices (Schlag 2019). Incorporating the Méndez Principles into legal mandates and institutional policies will further reinforce ethical commitments and align HUMINT with global human rights norms. Future research should delve into less-explored areas, such as the long-term impact of ethical training on the performance and well-being of interrogators. Examining the role of technology, such as AI-assisted credibility analysis or VR simulations, can enhance ethical methods without compromising core principles (Granhag et al., 2020). Additionally, cross-cultural studies should be prioritised to adapt techniques to global contexts, ensuring their universal applicability.

Conclusion

Grounding HUMINT interrogation in ethical principles not only aligns practice with international human-rights standards but also produces more reliable and actionable intelligence. Although the absolute ban on torture is universally recognized, it is often ignored in the field. By contrast, an approach rooted in procedural justice—treating sources with respect, granting them a genuine voice, maintaining impartiality, and demonstrating sincere intentions—builds the trust essential for open and accurate disclosure.

At the heart of this ethical transformation is rapport: a collaborative, respectful relationship in which interrogators attend to a source's motivations and welfare while pursuing a shared goal of truth-seeking. Techniques inspired by motivational interviewing cultivate empathy and autonomy, while carefully applied social-influence strategies overcome resistance without coercion. Practices such as reciprocity—demonstrating genuine concern to invite openness—and perspective-taking—seeking to understand the source's viewpoint first—deepen rapport and foster candid dialogue, turning interrogation into a cooperative information-gathering process.

Effective interviews also draw on insights from cognitive and behavioural science to respect the strengths and limits of human memory. By favouring open-ended questions and avoiding leading prompts, investigators minimize distortion and maximize accurate recall. Yet technique alone is not enough: investigators must combine ability—skills in active listening, adaptive questioning, and emotional atonement—with integrity to apply these skills ethically in every encounter. Interviews must also be tailored to cultural contexts and individual vulnerabilities—whether medical, psychological, or situational—to protect rights and enhance the quality of information gathered.

The Méndez Principles crystallize these practices into six pillars: Foundations ground methods in science and ethics; Practice emphasizes planning and truth over coercion; Vulnerability calls for early risk assessment and accommodation; Training mandates ongoing, validated instruction; Accountability requires transparent policies and independent oversight; and Implementation depends on supportive laws, resources, and collaboration. Evidence shows that non-coercive frameworks like PEACE, ORBIT, and Shift-of-Strategy outperform aggressive tactics, delivering superior intelligence while upholding legitimacy.

In sum, ethical interrogation is both a moral imperative and a strategic advantage. By centring human dignity, leveraging science-based methods, and enforcing robust oversight,

intelligence agencies can secure higher-quality intelligence and maintain public trust. As security challenges become more complex, ongoing research, rigorous training, and unwavering commitment to these principles will be vital for ensuring HUMINT interrogation remains both ethically sound and operationally effective.

References

- Ahmed, N.U. (2022). Integrating Machine Learning in Military Intelligence Process: Study of futuristic approaches towards human-machine collaboration. *National Defence College E-Journal*, [online] 2(1), pp.59–89. Available at: <https://ndcjournal.ndc.gov.bd/ndcj/index.php/ndcj/article/view/315>.
- Alison, L.J., Alison, E.K., Surmon-Böhr, F. and Shortland, N.D. (2021a). ORBIT: The Basics. In: L.J. Alison, E.K. Alison, N.D. Shortland and F. Surmon-Böhr, eds., *ORBIT: The Science of Rapport-Based Interviewing for Law Enforcement, Security, and Military*. New York: Oxford University Press, pp.4•7–65.
- Alison, L., Alison, E., Noone, G., Elntib, S., Waring, S. and Christiansen, P. (2014). The efficacy of rapport-based techniques for minimizing counter-interrogation tactics amongst a field sample of terrorists. *Psychology, Public Policy, and Law*, 20(4), pp.421–430. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1037/law0000021>.
- Alison, L.J., Shortland, N.D., Surmon-Böhr, F. and Alison, E.K. (2021b). A Blighted History: From the Lancaster Witch Trials to 9/11. In: L.J. Alison, E.K. Alison, N.D. Shortland and F. Surmon-Böhr, eds., *ORBIT: The Science of Rapport-Based Interviewing for Law Enforcement, Security, and Military*. New York: Oxford University Press, pp.1–27.
- Anti-Torture Initiative, Association for the Prevention of Torture and the Norwegian Centre for Human Rights (2021). *Principles on Effective Interviewing for Investigations and Information Gathering*. [online] Available at: <https://interviewingprinciples.com/>.
- Bagaric, M. and Clarke, J. (2005). Not Enough Official Torture in the World? The Circumstances in Which Torture Is Morally Justifiable. *University of San Francisco Law Review*, [online] 39(3), pp.581–616. Available at: <http://hdl.handle.net/10536/DRO/DU:30003363> [Accessed 2•6 Apr. 2025].
- Brecher, B. (2017). *Torture and the Ticking Bomb*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Brimbal, L., Kleinman, S.M., Oleszkiewicz, S. and Meissner, C.A. (2020). Developing Rapport and Trust in the Interrogative Context: An Empirically-Supported and Ethical Alternative to Customary Interrogation Practices. In: S.J. Barela, M. Fallon and J.D. Ohlin, eds., *Interrogation and Torture: Integrating Efficacy with Law and Morality*. Oxford Academic, pp.141–170.

- Bull, R. (2023). Improving the Interviewing of Suspects Using the PEACE Model: A Comprehensive Overview. *Canadian Journal of Criminology and Criminal Justice*, 65(1), pp.80–91. doi:<https://doi.org/10.3138/cjccj.2023-0003>.
- Bull, R. and Milne, B. (2020). Recommendations for Collecting Event Memory Evidence. In: J. Pozzulo, E. Pica and C. Sheahan, eds., *Memory and Sexual Misconduct: Psychological Research for Criminal Justice*. New York: Routledge, pp.198–222.
- Deljić, I. and Fazlić, A. (2023). Univerzalna perspektiva etičkog pristupa ispitivanju osumnjičenika. *Policija i sigurnost*, 32(2), pp.184–197. doi:<https://doi.org/10.59245/ps.32.2.6>.
- Demirden, A. (2023). Psychology of Investigative Interviewing: Implications of Mendez Principles in Advancing the Field. *Law and Justice Review*, 26, pp.141–173.
- Drizin, S.A. and Leo, R.A. (2004). The Problem of False Confessions in the post-DNA World. *North Carolina Law Review*, 82(3), pp.891–1008.
- El-Khoury, J., Haidar, R. and Barkil-Oteo, A. (2020). Psychological torture: Characteristics and Impact on Mental Health. *International Journal of Social Psychiatry*, 67(5), p.002076402096180. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1177/0020764020961800>.
- Etienne, M. and McAdams, R. (2018). Police Deception in Interrogation as a Problem of Procedural Legitimacy. *Texas Tech Law Review*, 54(1), pp.21–38.
- Goodman-Delahunty, J. and Martschuk, N. (2018). Securing reliable information in investigative interviews: coercive and noncoercive strategies preceding turning points. *Police Practice and Research*, 21(2), pp.1–20. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1080/15614263.2018.1531752>.
- Gordon, N.J. and Fleisher, W.L. (2019). *Effective Interviewing and Interrogation Techniques*. London: Academic Press, An Imprint Of Elsevier.
- Granhag, P.A., Oleszkiewicz, S., Sakrisvold, M.L. and Kleinman, S.M. (2020). The Scharff technique: training military intelligence officers to elicit information from small cells of sources. *Psychology, Crime and Law*, [online] 26(5), pp.438–460. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1080/1068316X.2019.1669600>.
- Hartwig, M., Meissner, C.A. and Semel, M.D. (2014). Human Intelligence Interviewing and Interrogation: Assessing the Challenges of Developing an Ethical, Evidence-based Approach. In: R. Bull, ed., *Investigative interviewing*. New York: Springer, pp.209–228.
- Henrico, S. and Putter, D. (2024). Intelligence Collection Disciplines—A Systematic Review. *Journal of Applied Security Research*, pp.46–70. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1080/19361610.2023.2296765>.
- Hope, L., Anakwah, N., Antfolk, J., Brubacher, S.P., Flowe, H., Gabbert, F., Giebels, E., Kanja, W., Korkman, J., Kyo, A., Naka, M., Otgaar, H., Powell, M.B., Selim, H., Skrifvars,

- J., Sorkpah, I.K., Sowatey, E.A., Steele, L.C., Stevens, L. and Sumampouw, N.E.J. (2021). Urgent issues and prospects at the intersection of culture, memory, and witness interviews: Exploring the challenges for research and practice. *Legal and Criminological Psychology*, [online] 27(1), pp.1–31. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1111/lcrp.12202>.
- Jacobson, A.D. (2021). Back to the Dark Side: Explaining the CIA's Repeated Use of Torture. *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 33(2), pp.257–270. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2021.1880193>.
- Kassin, S.M., Cleary, H.M.D., Gudjonsson, G.H., Leo, R.A., Meissner, C.A., Redlich, A.D. and Scherr, K.C. (2025). Police-induced confessions, 2.0: Risk factors and recommendations. *Law and Human Behavior*, [online] 49(1). doi:<https://doi.org/10.1037/lhb0000593>.
- Kelly, C.E., Dawson, E. and Hartwig, M. (2019). Context Manipulation in Police interviews: A Field Experiment. *Journal of Experimental Criminology*, 17(1), pp.67–86. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11292-019-09389-8>.
- Kleinman, S.M. (2006). KUBARK Counterintelligence Interrogation Review: Observations of an Interrogator - Lessons Learned and Avenues for Further Research. In: R.A. Fein, ed., *Educing Information: Interrogation Science And Art: Foundations For The Future : Phase 1 Report* . Washington DC: National Defense Intelligence College, pp.95–140.
- Kovacs, A. (1997). Using intelligence. *Intelligence and National Security*, 12(4), pp.14• 5–164. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1080/02684529708432452>.
- Kryuchkov, K. (2021). The Hoffman report: The Lesson We Learned (?). *Psychotherapy and Politics International*, 19(2). doi:<https://doi.org/10.1002/ppi.1576>.
- Launay, C., Brunel, M. and Bull, R. (2022). What Do Police Interview Eyewitnesses for? A Review. *Policing: A Journal of Policy and Practice*, 16(4), pp.602–614. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1093/police/paab08>.
- Luke, T.J. and Granhag, P.A. (2022). The shift-of-strategy (sos) approach: Using evidence strategically to influence suspects' counter-interrogation strategies. *Psychology, Crime & Law*, 29(7), pp.1–26. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1080/1068316x.2022.2030738>.
- Lutz, E. and Sikkink, K. (2001). The Justice Cascade: The Evolution and Impact of Foreign Human Rights Trials in Latin America. *Chicago Journal of International Law*, 2(1), pp.1–34.
- Margolis, G. (2013). The Lack of HUMINT: A Recurring Intelligence Problem. *Global Security Studies*, 4(2), pp.43–60.
- McCoy, A.W. (2006). *A Question of Torture: CIA Interrogation, from the Cold War to the War on Terror* (American Empire Project). New York: Henry Holt and Company, LLC.

- McCoy, A.W. (2012). *Torture and Impunity: The U.S. Doctrine of Coercive Interrogation*. Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press.
- Meissner, C.A., Kelly, C.E. and Woestehoff, S.A. (2015). Improving the Effectiveness of Suspect Interrogations. *Annual Review of Law and Social Science*, 11(1), pp. 211–233. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-lawsocsci-120814-121657>.
- Meissner, C.A., Redlich, A.D., Michael, S.W., Evans, J.R., Camilletti, C.R., Bhatt, S. and Brandon, S. (2014). Accusatorial and information-gathering interrogation methods and their effects on true and false confessions: a meta-analytic review. *Journal of Experimental Criminology*, 10(4), pp.459–486. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11292-014-9207-6>.
- Meissner, C.A., Surmon-Böhr, F., Oleszkiewicz, S. and Alison, L.J. (2017). Developing an evidence-based perspective on interrogation: A review of the U.S. government's high-value detainee interrogation group research program. *Psychology, Public Policy, and Law*, 23(4), pp.438–457. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1037/law0000136>.
- Méndez, J.E. (2021). The need for the Principles on Effective Interviewing for Investigations and Information Gathering. *Torture Journal*, 31(3), pp.117–120. doi:<https://doi.org/10.7146/torture.v32i3.128719>.
- Méndez, J.E. and Drummond, V. (2021). The Méndez Principles: A New Standard for Effective Interviewing by Police and Others, While Respecting Human Rights. [online] Just Security. Available at: <https://www.justsecurity.org/76711/themen-dez-principles-a-new-standard-for-effective-interviewing-by-police-and-other-while-respecting-human-rights/> [Accessed 26 April 2025].
- Méndez, J.E. and Ilsey, M. (2023). Principles on Effective Investigative Interviews: A New Instrument of International Law. Human Rights Brief, [online] 27(•1). Available at: <https://digitalcommons.wcl.american.edu/hrbrief/vol27/iss1/1>.
- Milne, R. and Bull, R. (1999). *Investigative interviewing: Psychology and Practice*. Chichester: John Wiley & Sons.
- Moffett, L., Oxburgh, G.E., Dresser, P., Watson, S.J. and Gabbert, F. (2021). Inside the shadows: a survey of UK human source intelligence (HUMINT) practitioners, examining their considerations when handling a covert human intelligence source (CHIS). *Psychiatry, Psychology and Law*, 29(4), pp.1–19. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1080/13218719.2021.1926367>.
- Nunan, J., Stanier, I., Milne, R., Shawyer, A. and Walsh, D. (2020a). Eliciting human intelligence: police source handlers' perceptions and experiences of rapport during covert human intelligence sources (CHIS) interactions. *Psychiatry, Psychology and Law*, [online] 27(4), pp.1–27. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1080/13218719.2020.1734978>.
- Nunan, J., Stanier, I., Milne, R., Shawyer, A. and Walsh, D. (2020b). Source Handler telephone interactions with covert human intelligence sources: An exploration of

- question types and intelligence yield. *Applied Cognitive Psychology*, 34(6), pp.1473–1484. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1002/acp.3726>.
- Nunan, J., Stanier, I., Milne, R., Shawyer, A., Walsh, D. and May, B. (2020c). The Impact of Rapport on Intelligence yield: Police Source Handler Telephone Interactions with Covert Human Intelligence Sources. *Psychiatry, Psychology and Law*, 29(1), pp.1–19. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1080/13218719.2020.1784807>.
- Powell, M.B. and Brubacher, S.P. (2020). The origin, experimental basis, and application of the standard interview method: An information-gathering framework. *Australian Psychologist*, 55(6). doi:<https://doi.org/10.1111/ap.12468>.
- Rejali, D. (2007). *Torture and Democracy*. New Jersey/Oxfordshire: Princeton University Press.
- Rumney, P.N.S. (2006). Is coercive interrogation of terrorist suspects effective? A response to Bagaric and Clarke. *University of San Francisco Law Review*, [online] 40(2), pp.479–514. Available at: <https://repository.usfca.edu/usflawreview/vol40/iss2/5>.
- Russano, M.B., Narchet, F.M., Kleinman, S.M. and Meissner, C.A. (2014). Structured Interviews of Experienced HUMINT Interrogators. *Applied Cognitive Psychology*, 28(6), pp.847–859. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1002/acp.3069>.
- Schlag, G. (2019). Representing torture in *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012): Popular culture as a site of norm contestation. *Media, War & Conflict*, 14(2), p.175063521986402. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1177/1750635219864023>.
- Shaeffer, R., Hinestroza, V. and Tait, S. (2023). The Méndez Principles. In: G.E. Oxburgh, T. Mykelbust, M. Fallon and M. Hartwig, eds., *Interviewing and Interrogation: A Review of Research and Practice Since World War II*. Torkel Opsahl Academic Epublisher.
- Skolnick, J.H. and Leo, R.A. (1992). The ethics of deceptive interrogation. *Criminal Justice Ethics*, 11(1), pp.3–12. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1080/0731129x.1992.9991906>.
- Snook, B., Barron, T., Fallon, L., Kassin, S.M., Kleinman, S., Leo, R.A., Meissner, C.A., Morello, L., Nirider, L.H., Redlich, A.D. and Trainum, J.L. (2020). Urgent issues and prospects in reforming interrogation practices in the United States and Canada. *Legal and Criminological Psychology*, 26(1), pp.1–24. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1111/lcrp.12178>.
- Stampnitzky, L. (2020). Truth and consequences? Reconceptualizing the Politics of Exposure. *Security Dialogue*, 51(6), pp.597–613. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1177/0967010620904576>.
- Steele, R.D. (2010) 'Human intelligence (HUMINT): all humans, all minds, all the time' in *Human Intelligence: All Humans, All Minds, All the Time*, Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 45+, available: <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/>

A259680856/AONE?u=anon~43c12e40&sid=googleScholar&xid=bef6741e [access ed 28 April 2025].

- Surmon-Böhr, F., Alison, L.J., Shortland, N.D. and Alison, E.K. (2021). Under Pressure: Imminent- Threat Interviews with Terrorist Suspects. In: L.J. Alison, E.K. Alison, N.D. Shortland and F. Surmon- Böhr, eds., *ORBIT: The Science of Rapport- Based Interviewing for Law Enforcement, Security, and Military*. New York: Oxford University Press, pp.113–135.
- Tribbels, S. and Michels, M. (2024). Validity and Effectiveness of Interrogation Techniques: A Meta-Analytic Review. *Military psychology*, 37(2), pp.1–11. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1080/08995605.2024.2324622>.
- United Nations Steering Committee on Effective Interviewing (2021). Principles of Effective Interviewing for Investigation and Information Gathering. [online] Available at: <https://www.apt.ch/our-prioritiesfair-criminal-justice-systems/principles-effective-interviewing-investigations-and>.
- Vrij, A., Meissner, C.A., Fisher, R.P., Kassin, S.M., Morgan, C.A. and Kleinman, S.M. (2017). Psychological Perspectives on Interrogat ion. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, [online] 12(6), pp.927–955. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1177/1745691617706515>.
- Waldron, J. (2018). Torture and Positive Law: Jurisprudence for the White House. In: S.A. Anderson and M.C. Nussbaum, eds., *Confronting Torture: Essays on the Ethics, Legality, History, and Psychology of Torture Today*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, pp.257–293.
- Walsh, D., Areh, I. and Bull, R. (2025). Conclusion: Towards a global understanding of what is effective interviewing for investigations and information gathering. In: D. Walsh, I. Areh and R. Bull, eds., *Routledge International Handbook of Investigative Interviewing and Interrogation*. Oxon/New York: Routledge, pp.494–500.
- Williamson, T.M. (1993). From interrogation to investigative interviewing; strategic trends in police questioning. *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology*, 3(2), pp.89–99. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1002/casp.2450030203>.