

**EVALUATING TRAINING FOR INTERVIEWING VULNERABLE SUSPECTS IN
THE NETHERLANDS: POLICE DETECTIVES' EXPERIENCES AND
PERCEPTIONS**

A MASTER THESIS

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Abstract

The Dutch training program for interviewing vulnerable suspects (Verhoren van Kwetsbare Verdachten, VKV) aims to equip police detectives with the skills to effectively interview vulnerable suspects. Despite the growing awareness of the risks associated with vulnerable suspects, it remains unclear whether specialized VKV interviewers address these risks effectively and ethically. This study aims to bridge this gap in understanding the effectiveness of the VKV training by conducting a preliminary evaluation through questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. Experiences from 27 alumni and 9 current trainees regarding the training were gathered and thematically analysed using an experiential approach. While participants believed the VKV training effectively helped them develop their interview competencies, learning outcomes could be improved by aligning the training more closely with prior education, incorporating more active learning strategies, offering continuous support during and after training, and creating opportunities for trainees to refine their skills in real-world situations. These improvements could help build confidence and foster the successful implementation of the training on the job.

Keywords: investigative interview, interrogation, training evaluation, vulnerable suspects, qualitative research

Introduction

Suspect interviewing is a core activity within law enforcement. In the interview context, police detectives are likely to frequently encounter vulnerable suspects due to their overrepresentation in the criminal justice system (Herrington & Roberts, 2012; Young et al., 2013; Rava et al., 2016; Kaal & De Jong, 2017; Geijssen et al. 2018). According to the definition of the European Commission (2013), vulnerable suspects may have a reduced ability to understand and effectively participate in criminal proceedings due to their age, mental or physical condition, or disability. In the Netherlands, legislation and guidelines for the police and the Public Prosecution Service categorize vulnerable suspects into four groups: minors, suspects with intellectual disabilities, suspects with cognitive impairments, and suspects with psychiatric disorders (Rispen & Van der Sleen, 2022). Suspects who fall into one or more of these categories may pose challenges during a suspect interview due to their mental state, potentially creating risks for the investigation (Gudjonsson, 2003; Uzieblo, 2014; Rispen & Van der Sleen, 2022). Research has shown, however, that vulnerable suspects are not always recognized during police investigations (Mergaerts & Dehaghani, 2020). Even when vulnerabilities are identified, they are not always acted upon, leading to insufficient support for these suspects (Dehaghani, 2019; Gulati et al., 2020; Vaughan et al., 2024). Given the challenges associated with the traits of vulnerable suspects, there is a need for more awareness when dealing with these individuals.

In the Netherlands, general principles have been introduced to safeguard the criminal procedure and ensure the fair treatment of vulnerable suspects. For instance, the Dutch Ministry of Justice and Security (2005) recommends audiovisual recording of interviews with vulnerable suspects and the mandatory presence of legal representation during these interviews. The European Commission supports these recommendations and has established additional rights for vulnerable suspects, including access to procedural information, the right

to medical assistance, and the protection of personal privacy (2013, Art. 9; Art. 13). The Mendéz Principles (2021) emphasize the responsibility of police detectives to recognize vulnerabilities in suspects and ensure their rights are supported during interviews. In line with these principles, both the European Commission and the Dutch Ministry recommend specialized training programs for police detectives (European Union, 2013, Art. 17; Ministerie van Justitie en Veiligheid, 2005). Taken together, these initiatives provide a foundation for ensuring the fair treatment of vulnerable suspects and reducing their vulnerabilities. However, since policymakers have not specified how these principles should be implemented, these guidelines alone may not offer sufficient support for vulnerable suspects.

To fill this gap, the Dutch Police Academy developed the training *Verhoren van Kwetsbare Verdachten* (interviewing vulnerable suspects), which will hereafter be referred to as VKV training. This training is designed to equip experienced police detectives with the knowledge and skills needed to effectively interview vulnerable suspects. Although approximately 300 police detectives have completed the VKV training since 2012, their perceptions of the training and its effectiveness in interviewing vulnerable suspects remain unclear. This lack of evaluation is concerning, especially since police frequently encounter vulnerable suspects (Asquith & Bartkowiak-Théron, 2020). To address this need for evaluation, the current study assesses the perceived effectiveness of the VKV training by gathering insights from both current and former trainees. Understanding the training's strengths and areas for improvement can help the Police Academy refine its program and enhance detectives' competencies in interviewing vulnerable suspects, resulting in more reliable investigations. More importantly, the findings may offer insights for similar vocational training initiatives, potentially benefitting professional development across a broader range of contexts.

Characteristics of Vulnerable Suspects

The VKV training covers the four categories of vulnerable suspects in the Netherlands – minors, individuals with cognitive impairments, intellectual disabilities, and psychiatric disorders. Each of these groups faces specific challenges during police interviews. *Minors* (under 18 years) may struggle with reasoning, problem-solving, impulse control, and regulating behaviour (Crone & Dahl, 2012). They are prone to adjusting their responses due to their heightened sensitivity to rewards, such as praise from authority figures, which can make their statements less reliable (Crone & Dahl, 2012; Gudjonsson, 2003; Rispens & Van der Sleen, 2022). Suspects with *cognitive impairments*, such as acquired brain damage, may experience difficulties with language, memory, attention, and information processing (AVR, 2018; Rispens & Van der Sleen, 2022), potentially leading to less accurate statements (Uzieblo, 2014). Suspects with *intellectual disabilities*, characterized by an IQ score between 50 and 85 (NJI, 2015), may face challenges in understanding questions, formulating responses, and recognizing the consequences of their answers (Gudjonsson, 2003). They may also experience social and emotional difficulties, which can further complicate their ability to engage in interviews (Everington & Fulero, 1999, as cited in Uzieblo, 2014; Rispens & Van der Sleen, 2022). Lastly, suspects with *psychiatric disorders*, such as schizophrenia, psychotic disorder, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), and Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), may face difficulties in memory retrieval, emotional regulation, and impulse control, particularly in stressful situations (Gudjonsson et al., 2008; Beukers, 2017; Landgraf et al., 2011).

A common problem across vulnerable individuals is their increased susceptibility to suggestibility and compliance. Suggestibility is defined as the tendency to falsely believe that misinformation provided by someone else (e.g., the interviewer) is true (Loftus, 2005), while compliance occurs when a suspect does not intrinsically agree with the interviewer but feels

pressured to say or do what they think is expected of them (Gudjonsson, 2003; Uzieblo, 2014). Even though non-vulnerable individuals can also be susceptible to compliance and suggestibility, vulnerable suspects are at increased risk due to common deficits in cognitive, emotional, or behavioural regulation. These difficulties heighten the chance of giving false statements and even false confessions (Gudjonsson, 2003; Kassin, 2008). Despite these challenges, research indicates that vulnerable suspects can still provide reliable statements when police detectives adjust their interviews to the needs of these suspects and provide them with the necessary support (Gudjonsson, 2010; Uzieblo, 2014; Asquith & Bartkowiak-Théron, 2020; Farrugia & Gabbert, 2019, Oxburgh et al., 2016). However, to ensure vulnerable suspects are interviewed effectively, police detectives should receive specialized training in recognizing their needs and applying appropriate interview techniques.

Addressing Vulnerability in the Netherlands Through VKV Training

In the Netherlands, interviews with vulnerable suspects are ideally conducted by trained VKV interviewers (Liedenbaum et al., 2015), also referred to as VKV specialists. VKV specialists completed the 15-week VKV training program, which is a vocational training for police detectives with a background in complex interviewing (previously referred to as professional interviewing) or interviewing vulnerable witnesses in sexual offense cases. Throughout the training, trainees develop competencies in interview methodology and strategies, communication skills, and reflective practice (Studiegids Verhoren van Kwetsbare Verdachten, n.d.). The training consists of 16 in-person sessions and two internships, each lasting two days. The program is designed to be completed alongside the detectives' work schedule and follows a two-week structure: one week of three sessions, followed by a week focused on homework assignments.

In the first week, trainees are introduced to the concept of vulnerability and its legal and ethical implications. The training then dedicates a week to information exchange to help

bridge the gap between trainees' different interview backgrounds. Once the group reunites, one full session is allocated to each of the four vulnerable groups, except for intellectual disabilities, which receives two sessions. Furthermore, an additional session is dedicated to discussing the specific psychiatric disorders ADHD and ASD together. Besides theoretical learning, trainees engage in these sessions through active learning activities that include group assignments, practical exercises with trained actors and observing and discussing interviews. After covering all topics, trainees have a four-week break during which they complete their internships. The final two weeks focus on practicing interviews in preparation for the assessment. For the assessment, trainees are required to analyse a case report on a vulnerable suspect and prepare for both a suspect-focused and case-focused interview, which they will perform with an actor. Trainees' competencies are evaluated based on their written documentation and their interview performance, with a particular focus on tailoring their approach to the suspect's vulnerability.

Expectations for Alumni

After completing the training, VKV specialists are expected to identify vulnerable suspects and overcome biases related to vulnerabilities. In interviews, these specialists are supposed to focus on rapport-building, avoid police jargon, and provide vulnerable suspects with opportunities to express their thoughts (Studiegids Verhoren van Kwetsbare Verdachten, n.d.). These practices are crucial, as interviewers' perceptions of vulnerable suspects can affect how a suspect is treated and influence procedural decisions (Oxburgh et al., 2016). In turn, these decisions can impact cooperation from the suspects' side. Furthermore, since vulnerable suspects have a special need for emotional support to help overcome feelings of anxiety and humiliation (Jessiman & Cameron, 2017; Gulati et al., 2020), building trust can increase a sense of fairness and help them feel valued, which can lead to improved cooperation (Oxburgh et al., 2016). VKV specialists are expected to adapt their questioning

style to the suspects' age, developmental level, and disabilities. This includes adjusting word choice, question formulation, interview pace, and social behaviour. Tailoring these elements to the suspect's needs can help them in understanding and answering questions (Farrugia & Gabbert, 2019). Moreover, VKV specialists are trained to avoid techniques that may increase suggestibility and compliance in vulnerable suspects, as doing so can minimize risks associated with vulnerability and increase the suspect's ability to defend themselves (Mendéz, 2021). Given these findings, the VKV training seems to incorporate key elements that are likely to enhance the quality and fairness of interviews with vulnerable suspects.

Effectiveness of Dutch Interview Practices

The Police Academy strives to develop training programs that are based on scientific theory, aiming to teach police students best policing practices (Politieacademie, n.d.). Despite this objective, there remains a gap between training and actual practices. Research on interview practices in the Netherlands show mixed findings. Vanderhallen et al. (2022) indicated that Dutch police interviewers generally conduct interviews in line with best practices and interview guidelines, although they did not specify whether any of these interviewers had received VKV training. At the same time, Geijsen et al. (2018) expressed criticisms regarding the performance of interviewers with vulnerable suspects. They found that, in 84% of the cases, vulnerable suspects were interviewed inappropriately because interviewers used the wrong questioning style (e.g., closed-ended or leading questions). However, this study also lacked information about interviewers' training background. Additionally, the study applied a broad definition of vulnerability, including suspects who abuse alcohol and drugs, which made up a quarter of the sample (Geijsen et al., 2018). This group was not specifically addressed in Dutch guidelines or the VKV training manual. As a result, since neither of these studies specifically focused on detectives who completed the

VKV training, and given the differing definitions of vulnerability used, it is impossible to draw conclusions about the effectiveness of the VKV training.

The Current Study

This qualitative study evaluates the effectiveness of the VKV training by examining the experiences and opinions of former and current trainees. The effectiveness of a training is typically assessed by improvements in trainees' knowledge, skills, job performance, and organizational outcomes (Kirkpatrick & Kirkpatrick, 2022; Tonhäuser & Büker, 2016). In the present study, effectiveness is defined by trainees' perceptions of their acquired knowledge, interview performance, and their motivation and confidence to apply the training in real interview settings. In other words, the study explores how the VKV training contributed to trainees' subjective sense of competence in interviewing vulnerable suspects. Insights were gathered from both current trainees and alumni to assess both immediate experiences with the training, as well as the long-term factors that influence the training's effectiveness. The aim is to identify aspects of the training that are considered effective or in need of improvement, providing guidance for the Police Academy to refine its program and enhance interactions with vulnerable individuals. Beyond this objective, the study seeks to provide vocational training initiatives across different contexts with insights to strengthen both professional development and organizational effectiveness.

Methods

Study Design

A mixed-methods design, including self-report questionnaires and interviews, was employed to gather responses from former and current trainees of the VKV training. By using both qualitative and quantitative methods, the study uncovered general patterns in trainees' experiences with the training while also providing detailed insights into their individual

experiences (Kelle, 2006). This report focused exclusively on the qualitative data derived from open-ended questionnaire responses and interviews. The quantitative data from closed-ended questionnaire responses were analysed in a separate report.

Since the training had not been evaluated before, this study involved VKV alumni from previous years and the current cohort of 2024. Collecting data from these groups enabled comparing experiences of current trainees with those of alumni who are applying the training in practice. This data aimed to identify the expectations and needs of both VKV trainees and VKV specialists, as well as potential differences between the two groups. Furthermore, data from the current cohort were collected at two time points, which allowed for an assessment of changes in trainees' opinions and attitudes throughout the training program.

Participants

Potential participants were identified in collaboration with a VKV trainer at the Police Academy. The VKV alumni received an e-mail invitation to the questionnaire. Thirty alumni responded, of whom three were excluded due to incomplete responses. The final sample of 27 alumni included 9 males and 18 females. Their ages ranged from 36 to 55 years, with a mean age of 51.33 years ($SD = 6.88$). The majority of participants ($n = 21$) had over 15 years of experience in suspect interviewing, followed by 4 participants with 11-15 years of experience, and 3 participants with 6-10 years of experience.

The current cohort was contacted at two time points during this study: first, to complete an initial questionnaire after four weeks of training, assuming that by this point trainees had formed opinions about the program; and second, to complete a follow-up questionnaire after completing the VKV training. For the initial questionnaire, the current cohort was approached in person at the end of a training session, where the study's purpose was explained, and participation was requested. Of the ten trainees, six completed the initial

questionnaire. This sample consisted entirely of females, with ages ranging between 25 and 55 years old ($M = 36.83$, $SD = 10.81$). Their experiences in suspect interviewing ranged from 6 to over 15 years ($M = 12$, $SD = 3.37$).

For the follow-up questionnaire, the current cohort was contacted via e-mail. Five trainees completed this questionnaire, two of whom had also participated in the initial questionnaire. All identified as female, with ages ranging from 25 to 55 years ($M = 40.33$, $SD = 9.59$) and experiences in interviewing from 6 to over 15 years ($M = 11.2$, $SD = 3.43$). No participants were excluded from the analysis of either the initial or follow-up questionnaire.

Additionally, participants of the current cohort could indicate their willingness to take part in semi-structured interviews at the end of the questionnaires by providing their e-mail addresses. Participants who provided their e-mail addresses were contacted by the researcher, who also conducted the interviews. During the initial assessment phase, four participants were interviewed. A different sample of four participants, two of whom also participated in the initial interviews, was interviewed during the follow-up phase. To ensure participants' anonymity, demographic information is not presented due to the small sample sizes.

Materials

Questionnaires

Three digital self-report questionnaires were developed: one for the VKV alumni and two for the current VKV cohort, consisting of an initial and follow-up questionnaire. The advantages of digital questionnaires include their ease of distribution across geographically diverse participant groups, cost- and time-efficiency, and the promotion of anonymity (Hewson, 2016). Anonymity is especially important when addressing sensitive topics, as it

helps reduce socially desirable responses and power dynamics between participants and the researcher, thereby strengthening the validity of participants' responses.

The questionnaires included closed-ended statement blocks followed by open-ended questions that could be answered by writing a response in a textbox. These open questions allowed participants the freedom to express their thoughts and supported the coherence of their responses. At some points in the questionnaires, a general prompt ("If you would like to explain your answers to any of the above questions, you can do so below") was included, enabling participants to elaborate on the topics prompted by closed-ended statements. Since this study focused on the open-ended questionnaire responses, this report will primarily address them.

In developing the questions for the questionnaires and interviews, the VKV training guide served as the starting point, with the aim of assessing the extent to which participants' perceptions of the training aligned with the training objectives. Additionally, Kirkpatrick and Kirkpatrick's (2022) four-level evaluation model was used as a framework for structuring the questions. This model, consisting of the levels *Reaction*, *Learning*, *Behaviour*, and *Results*, enabled the evaluation of various aspects of the VKV training. It assessed participants' satisfaction and engagement (*Reaction*), the knowledge and skills acquired (*Learning*), changes in behaviour during suspect interviews after the training (*Behaviour*), and the overall, long-term impact of the training (*Results*), such as improved interview performance. The application of Kirkpatrick's model varied across the three questionnaires, depending on whether participants were alumni or currently enrolled in the training. This will be explained in more detail in the 'Alumni' and 'Current Cohort' sections.

In addition to the evaluation model, questions were developed to examine factors influencing training transfer and explore whether the VKV training incorporated these elements. Important individual-level factors that facilitate implementation of learned skills in

the workplace were examined, which include motivation, cognitive ability, and self-efficacy (Grohmann et al., 2014; Van der Locht et al., 2013). Additionally, relevant training-level factors, such as providing adequate pre-training, setting clear learning goals, and employing active learning methods, were assessed (Tonhäuser & Bükér, 2016). Furthermore, organizational factors such as support from colleagues and supervisors, as well as workplace conditions that encourage learning and innovation, were evaluated (Blume et al., 2009; Cromwell & Kolb, 2004; Tonhäuser & Bükér, 2016). Appendix A presents a table that outlines the content captured at each level. Together, the framework and additional questions allowed for an evaluation of how the VKV training was perceived and engaged with, as well as its applicability in vulnerable suspect interviews.

The questions were initially developed in Dutch, as this was the language of the target group. For feedback from English-speaking supervisors, the surveys were translated to English using ChatGPT (OpenAI, 2024). The feedback was discussed to confirm that the questions addressed essential aspects for evaluation. Furthermore, Dutch-speaking supervisors from the Police Academy reviewed the Dutch questionnaires to verify their clarity and relevance.

Alumni. The questionnaire for the alumni contained forty-two closed-ended statements, supplemented with eight open-ended questions, as shown in Table B1 (see Appendix B). At the first evaluation level, *Reaction*, participants' initial responses to the VKV training were assessed, including their satisfaction, engagement, and personal relevance of the content. This level also addressed participants' motivation to enrol in the VKV training. The second level, *Learning*, examined the extent to which the training influenced participants' knowledge, skills, attitudes, confidence, and commitment to interviewing vulnerable suspects. The *Behaviour* level evaluated the extent to which participants apply the material learned during the training in their daily work, and what the training could have offered to improve

the transfer of training. For alumni, the emphasis was on evaluating this level, as it assessed behavioural changes after completing the training and participants' perceptions of the applicability of the training material in the workplace. Lastly, according to Kirkpatrick and Kirkpatrick (2022), the *Results* level is intended to evaluate the impact of a training on organizational goals and its mission. However, as this study focused on participants' personal experiences, the Results level assessed long-term individual changes after completing the VKV training rather than changes at the organizational level. Topics addressed at this level included participants' motivation to continue applying the materials and factors impacting the application of the training in practice.

Current Cohort. For the current cohort, two questionnaires were developed: an initial questionnaire and a follow-up questionnaire. Evaluating the training at two time points allowed for a comparison of participants' responses, offering insights into how their perceptions evolved throughout the training. Both questionnaires were structured similarly to the questionnaire for alumni but differed in their application of Kirkpatrick and Kirkpatrick's (2022) model.

The initial questionnaire contained forty closed-ended statements, supplemented with six open-ended questions, as shown in Table B2 (Appendix B). Questions at the *Reaction* level aimed at capturing participants' reasons for enrolling, and their satisfaction with the training while they were enrolled in it. At the *Learning* level, participants evaluated their perceived knowledge of vulnerable suspects, their interview skills, and their confidence in interviewing different vulnerable suspect groups at that time. The *Behaviour* level assessed participants' identified needs for further strengthening their interview competencies. Finally, the *Results* level focused on participants' commitment to applying the learned material in the field, along with their willingness to continue developing their interview skills.

The follow-up questionnaire aimed at capturing participants' perceptions after completing the VKV training. It included forty-nine closed-ended statements and seven open-ended questions, as shown in Table B3 (Appendix B). At the *Reaction* level, changes in participants' motivation, knowledge, skills, and confidence throughout the program were assessed, and what elements of the training contributed to these changes (*Learning*). These questions provided insights into the immediate impact of the training on participants. At the *Behaviour* level, areas for improvement in the training that could enhance learning outcomes were evaluated. Finally, the *Results* level assessed participants' anticipated challenges in the workplace, together with their recommendations for improving the VKV training program. Insights gathered at this level can help identify gaps in training transfer to the workplace and highlight areas for improvement.

Interviews

Participants from the current cohort were asked to participate in semi-structured interviews to further discuss their experiences with the training. Semi-structured interviews offer the flexibility to ask follow-up questions on topics that arise during the interview (McGrath et al., 2019), which aligns with the partially inductive methodology of this study. This approach allows the researcher to explore new insights and gain a deeper understanding of participants' personal experiences with the training program. Moreover, combining responses from the questionnaires with insights gathered from the interviews provides a more in-depth and reliable understanding of participants' experiences (Heale & Forbes, 2013).

The interviews were structured similarly to the questionnaires, addressing participants' engagement with the training, their perceived competencies in interviewing, and anticipated challenges in the field. During the initial interview phase, the questions focused on participants' main drive to enrol in the training and their personal, self-defined goals. Additionally, the interests were on participants' satisfaction with the training sessions they had

already completed, the clarity and relevance of study materials, their attitudes toward the exam, and potential concerns participants anticipated during the remainder of the training program.

The follow-up interviews focused on exploring whether participants' expectations of the training were met and identifying which training elements either supported or hindered the development of their interviewing skills. Moreover, in-depth questions were asked to understand participants' experiences with training assessment and to gather insights into how they applied the training after its completion. For reference, Appendix C presents the questions from the initial interviews while appendix D presents the questions asked during the follow-up phase.

Procedure

This research has been ethically approved by the Faculty of Behavioural, Management and Social Sciences (BMS) at the University of Twente under application numbers 240991 and 240744. Participation was entirely voluntary, with no incentives offered. To partake in the questionnaires, participants followed a URL to the digital questionnaires, sent to them via e-mail. Prior to answering the questions, participants were provided with detailed information about the purpose, procedures, and potential risks and benefits of this study. Participants were offered an information form (see Appendix E) and asked to indicate their consent by checking a box. After providing their consent, minimal demographic information was collected, including age range, years of experience in suspect interviewing, and prior education. Participants were informed that any identifiable information, such as e-mail addresses, would be stored safely, and potentially recognizable responses would be anonymized. Next, participants proceeded to the questions about the VKV training.

For the interviews, participants gave additional informed consent by signing a digital form (see Appendix F). All interviews were conducted via Microsoft Teams (2024). The interviews were recorded and automatically transcribed by this software. The recordings were securely stored on the data storage system of the University of Twente until transcription was complete. This system is accessible only to authorized University staff, ensuring the data remains protected. After the transcriptions were reviewed and corrected by the researcher, the recordings were deleted, and any identifiable information in the transcripts was removed to ensure participant privacy.

Data Collection

Data from the questionnaires were collected digitally using Qualtrics software (Version 24.4). Both alumni and current cohort participants were sent a link to the questionnaires, followed by a reminder e-mail from their VKV trainer one week later. Data collection was halted after three weeks, aligning with a break in the VKV training, to ensure the initial questionnaire was conducted early in the program. Alumni participants completed the questionnaire in 33 minutes on average, while the mean completion time for current cohort participants was 24 minutes. Within two weeks of completing the questionnaires, potential interviewees from the current cohort were contacted by the interviewer. The interviews lasted between 31 and 46 minutes, with a mean duration of 36 minutes.

Six weeks after current VKV trainees completed their training, the second phase of data collection took place, which involved the follow-up questionnaire for the current cohort, followed by interviews. This phase followed the same procedure as the first. The mean completion time for the follow-up questionnaire was 36 minutes. Interviews were conducted within three weeks of completing the questionnaires and lasted between 36 and 50 minutes, with a mean duration of 43 minutes.

Data Analysis

Three participants who did not complete the questionnaire were excluded from the analysis. Data analysis was conducted thematically using ATLAS.ti (Version 24.1.1), a qualitative analysis tool that enables the coding of data segments and the classification of related codes into groups, referred to as themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The data from the three assessment phases – alumni, current cohort initial, and current cohort follow-up – were analysed separately to maintain the integrity of the samples and examine differences in training experiences across groups. The final thematic framework combined insights from all three assessment phases, highlighting strengths and areas for improvement in the VKV training. To understand participants' perceptions of the training and evaluating its practical implications, an experiential orientation was adopted, which emphasizes self-reported personal and subjective experiences (Byrne, 2021). By capturing participants' opinions and staying closely aligned with their own words and meanings, the analysis offered insights into their perspectives on the training's effectiveness and the relevance of the training to their job after its completion.

The researcher first became familiar with the data, which is the initial stage of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). A deductive approach was then applied to identify relevant codes, based on the predefined framework of Kirkpatrick and Kirkpatrick (2022) and the transfer determinants. To explore additional themes, an inductive approach was also applied, allowing for a detailed examination of participants' perspectives and enabling themes to emerge naturally without being limited to predefined topics (Thomas, 2006). In the third stage, the codes were grouped into semantic themes which illustrated explicit and surface-level patterns in participants' experiences with the VKV training. 'Semantic' means that the descriptions of the codes were closely related to their literal wording to make sure they accurately represented the data. The themes were further refined by ensuring that all codes

within each theme accurately represented their category. In the final stage, the themes were exported to Miro (2024), a mind-mapping tool, to organize and visualize patterns across the responses from the three questionnaires. This stage involved the interpretation of how the perspectives of different groups (alumni and the current cohort) and assessment points (initial and follow-up) were connected.

Results

Three themes were identified through thematic analysis, encompassing data from both the questionnaires and interviews, as presented in Table 1. While most themes aligned with the predefined framework (see Appendix A) through deductive coding, this study extended these themes across multiple learning stages rather than connecting them to specific stages of the training. The first theme, *Development*, captures participants' personal and professional growth as a result of the training. The second theme, *Training and Work Balance*, emerged inductively and highlights participants' experiences and challenges they encountered in managing work responsibilities alongside the demands of the training. The third theme, *Post-training Experiences*, addresses participants' work-related experiences and their needs after completing the training program.

Table 1

Outline of Main Themes and Subthemes

| Main theme | Subtheme |
|---------------------------|----------------------|
| Development | Motivation |
| | Knowledge and Skills |
| | Confidence |
| Training and Work Balance | |
| Post-training Experiences | Social Support |

Development

The theme *Development* reflects how the training impacted participants' personal and professional growth, highlighting changes in motivation, knowledge, skills, and confidence in interviewing vulnerable suspects.

Motivation

The subtheme *Motivation* addresses how participants' motivation developed throughout the training. It includes their reasons for enrolling, their drive to learn, and their enthusiasm to apply the training in practice and continue learning afterward. All participants were intrinsically motivated by either their interest in the topic of vulnerable suspects, their desire to specialize as interviewers, and a commitment to ensuring fair investigations. One participant explained, "I wanted to contribute to addressing the needs of vulnerable suspects as effectively as possible, while also prioritizing truth-finding", highlighting their self-driven decision to follow the training. Some participants mentioned that external motivation, such as a shortage of VKV specialists in their district, influenced the timing of their enrolment. However, this was always referred to as secondary motivation, emphasizing that intrinsic motivation was the primary driver.

During the training, most participants maintained their motivation for learning how to interview vulnerable suspects, with one participant reporting that the training further enhanced their enthusiasm, as they looked forward to conducting real interviews. Despite this strong drive, a few participants expressed concerns about possible challenges in the field that could affect their intentions to interview vulnerable suspects effectively. One participant shared: "I expect that during a Major Investigation Team (TGO) case with significant social

unrest, there will be a lot of pressure on the interviewers. It remains a skill to not let yourself be affected by this.” This suggests that participants worry that their commitment to dedicating more time to interviews with vulnerable suspects could create an internal conflict in high-pressure situations, which may lead to being torn between meeting external expectations and staying true to their professional values. Alumni shared similar concerns, noting that some colleagues or supervisors, who did not participate in the VKV training, did not fully understand or support the need for specialized interviews. These colleagues believed that interviews with vulnerable suspects take up too much time or are overly sensitive. Nevertheless, alumni expressed a strong sense of responsibility to remain dedicated to respecting the needs of vulnerable suspects and explaining the importance of specialized interviews, as they believed it was the right thing to do. Participants mentioned that their sense of responsibility was reinforced by the training, as it helped them empathize with the behaviour of vulnerable suspects and understand how their own mindset and reactions could have a meaningful impact during interviews. These changes in attitudes resulted in participants’ heightened drive to conduct interviews with vulnerable suspects in an effective and ethical manner.

Knowledge and Skills

The subtheme *Knowledge and Skills* reflects participants’ acquisition of both theoretical understanding and practical abilities of interviewing vulnerable suspects through the VKV training. Overall, participants reported an increased awareness of vulnerable suspects and an improved ability to identify them. While most participants were already familiar with the concept of vulnerability, due to prior education on vulnerable witnesses or personal experiences with vulnerable individuals, the training expanded their knowledge and skills for conducting interviews with vulnerable suspects. One participant emphasized this by reporting: “I have definitely gained many new insights, even though I thought I already knew

quite a bit about vulnerability, I now see things in a different light. It's been a positive experience."

The recommended books, especially "Handleiding Verhoren van Kwetsbare Verdachten" (Rispen & Van der Sleen, 2022), were found to be helpful in building a comprehensive understanding of vulnerable suspects and preparing for the exam. However, two participants noted that some training materials, such as demonstration videos, focused more on vulnerable witnesses. Another participant mentioned that some materials did not align with current police practices, making it challenging to determine which aspects were most relevant to their work.

In addition to the learning materials, many participants highlighted the usefulness of practice exercises in developing new interview skills. They emphasized that these exercises reflect the action-oriented roles of VKV specialists. Most participants expressed a preference for practicing with actors, as these situations helped them develop specific communication skills for interacting with vulnerable people. Additionally, some participants mentioned the two 2-day internships and the shadowing day at Parc Spelderholt, an academy for youth with intellectual disabilities, as valuable in expanding their knowledge and skills. These experiences helped participants in connecting theoretical concepts to the real world and understand the impact of different vulnerabilities. One participant noted: "It's reassuring to see that the information we received aligns with what we observe in real-life situations. This confirms that the training provided was accurate and useful." This statement not only reflects participants' preference for learning through practice but also suggests that practicing serves as a tool for verifying and assessing their communication skills and interview competencies. Practicing likely helped participants build confidence in their ability to communicate with vulnerable suspects.

Confidence

The subtheme *Confidence* reflects the impact of the VKV training on participants' trust in their interviewing skills, both during and after the program. At the initial questionnaire, all participants of the current cohort expressed concerns about their interview abilities, leading to stress and anxiety about the exam. Most participants attributed these worries to hearing about others who had failed the exam, while two participants believed their self-doubt stemmed from their tendencies to experience stress easily.

Both alumni participants and participants from the current cohort noted that feedback from VKV trainers, who were perceived as knowledgeable experts, and the additional exam preparation session helped strengthen their confidence in interviewing. Additionally, observing others conduct interviews and asking questions were seen as valuable methods for bridging the gap between theory and practice. However, nearly all participants felt the program lacked sufficient practice opportunities, particularly with actors, to effectively develop their interviewing skills and confidence.

While confidence in interviewing different vulnerability groups was somewhat strengthened throughout the training for most participants, they frequently expressed a desire to practice more with specific vulnerable groups, such as those with cognitive impairments or psychosis, as the training primarily focused on intellectual disabilities. Moreover, two participants highlighted the lack of practicing case-based interview scenarios, which they considered the most important element for interviews with vulnerable suspects. Participants' prior education played a role in this perspective. Those with previous training in interviewing vulnerable witnesses in sexual offense cases were already familiar with interviewing vulnerable individuals but had less experience with strategic interviews. Some participants of this group considered the training materials repetitive. On the contrary, participants with a

background in complex interviewing were familiar with strategic methods but less so with vulnerabilities. One participant of the latter group explained:

“During the exam you were only allowed to handle either the initial contact, the PGV (open questioning) phase, or the ZVG (specific questioning) phase, as every participant needed a turn. Throughout the entire training, I never conducted a case-specific interview. In fact, case-specific interviewing was barely addressed or covered only briefly. While some attention was given to this during the preparation of an interview plan, it would have been helpful to practice it further during the training. As a result, I noticed in my work that I sometimes accepted suspects’ answers too quickly. Over time, and through conducting more interviews, I have worked to improve this and made it more second nature to myself.”

This quote reflects participants’ belief that the training may have offered insufficient practical experiences with important elements of specialized interviews, focusing instead on aspects they already controlled.

The perceived lack of practice left some participants feeling insufficiently prepared to conduct real interviews, even after completing the training program. Nevertheless, most participants expressed confidence that they would continue to learn on the job, aligning with the training’s objective of preparing trainees to be beginner competent. Alumni generally agreed that the training provided a foundation for working with vulnerable suspects, but many noted that their confidence in interviewing was mostly built through real-world experience. However, for some alumni, building confidence through practical experience alone was not enough. One participant explained:

“During each interview, I still feel unsure if I’m adapting adequately [to the vulnerable suspect]. However, I have noticed that, with more experience in interviewing vulnerable

suspects, my confidence is growing. Even so, I wish to receive more feedback and gain insights from experiences of my VKV colleagues, to know if I'm on the right track.”

Another participant shared a similar concern:

“I believe the VKV training has contributed to improving my skills, but I still sometimes feel insufficiently trained. I often still feel the need to gain more practical experience and better understand the daily challenges faced by vulnerable individuals so that I can better address these in interviews.”

These quotes suggest that being beginner competent may leave participants feeling they require further training to build confidence in their interviewing abilities. Passing the exam does not entirely resolve participants' uncertainties, as they recognize there is still more to learn. It is possible that the training increased participants' awareness of the complexities of interviewing vulnerable suspects, which, for some, felt overwhelming and contributed to a decrease in confidence. Moreover, lowered self-confidence could be attributed to participants' personality traits, such as self-criticism. For example, one participant shared, “I have experience in interviewing suspects and working with vulnerable people. However, I worry that that combining these skills might lead to mistakes, which is especially frustrating since I tend to be a perfectionist.” This concern reflects the participants' difficulty in integrating two skill sets: strategic interviewing techniques and the ethical principles learned during training. The potentially conflicting demands of employing strategic questioning while maintaining sensitivity and empathy may create tension, thereby increasing the fear of making mistakes. While participants generally believed they were conducting interviews with vulnerable suspects ethically and correctly, both experienced and beginner VKV specialists expressed a desire for feedback and supervision to confirm their approach. The Police and the Police Academy do not provide formal support for new VKV specialists, although several alumni felt that guidance in the early stages would have been helpful in becoming practice ready.

Additionally, some participants suggested a refresher course to keep their interviewing skills up-to-date and enhance their confidence in working with vulnerable suspects.

Training and Work Balance

The theme *Training and Work Balance* reflects participants' experiences in managing their work responsibilities alongside the VKV training. Most participants felt that they received sufficient support from their supervisors to attend the VKV training. They were able to adjust their work schedules around the training days in accordance with their supervisors. However, some participants noted that despite their supervisor's approval, there was an implicit expectation to remain fully available for work, which created pressure to perform well at work and the training. One participant explained:

"I still need to make one assignment, but I will just do it in my own time. At least that way, I won't have my boss breathing down my neck, especially since something else always seems to come up. He did mention, though, that his flexibility has its limits."

In this quote, 'something else' likely refers to the unpredictable nature of police detective work, making it difficult to predict how long tasks will take. This concern was often raised by participants, with some suggesting that work should be put on hold throughout the training period, so the focus could be entirely on the training. One participant expressed:

"While they [the supervisor] agrees to the training, it's also expected that you complete your on-call shifts and weekend duties. In terms of planning, it would work better to fully focus on the training for a few months." Another participant shared a similar opinion, saying: "This training requires my full focus, but right now, we have one week of training, then one week at work, and so on. But at work, it feels like everything is half-hearted, you know what I mean?" In this context, being 'half-hearted' indicates that the divided focus between training and work reduces productivity at work, as participants' need to distribute their attention. The statements

suggests that participants believe they could learn more effectively and perform better if they were not distracted by the need to balance their work with training.

Post-training Experiences

The theme *Post-training Experiences* captures participants' insights on how the VKV training applies to their work, highlighting both the support they received and the challenges they encountered within their units.

Social Support

The subtheme *Social Support* includes participants' expectations and experiences regarding the support after completing the training. Most participants from the current cohort intend to proactively seek support once the training is completed and expressed confidence that they will have opportunities to receive feedback from others. Alumni confirmed that their colleagues are generally open to offering feedback, which contributes to overall satisfaction with the support they receive. Additionally, their teams often value the interviews conducted by VKV specialists, which makes alumni feel appreciated.

However, despite the satisfaction with the support, one-third of alumni expressed a desire for more recognition for conducting specialized interviews, as they believe some colleagues do not fully appreciate their relevance. This was addressed by one participant, saying: "My advice is valued by colleagues but when it comes to interviews, they often assume they can manage on their own or that they are dealing with an 'ordinary' suspect, particularly when no specific prior information is available." This quote highlights the lack of awareness among some police teams about the risks of interviewing vulnerable suspects without the necessary expertise, as well as the potential negative impact this has on both the suspect and the investigation. Alumni noted that they address these situations by explaining

the importance of specialized interviews, although for some, this is accompanied by frustration over their team's lack of understanding.

Furthermore, participants in the current cohort believed that their supervisor would grant them freedom to conduct interviews with vulnerable suspect, which was confirmed by the majority of alumni who feel free to conduct these interviews. However, several alumni highlighted a lack of support from their supervisors, describing them as uniformed or indifferent when it comes to specialized interviews. This issue was addressed by one participant as follows:

“There is little support and attention for the vulnerability of suspects, especially among supervisors. In cases where it is obvious that someone is vulnerable, the HoVJ [public prosecutors' assistant officer] still marks the person as not vulnerable during the pre-trial detention process. No questions are asked to properly assess this.”

This response highlights that the signs of vulnerability, which seem obvious to this participant, are not clear to everyone, reflecting the complexity of identifying vulnerable suspects.

Structural Differences in Units

The subtheme *Structural Differences in Units* highlights the variability in how VKV specialists are deployed and managed across different regions. The Dutch police force is divided into ten regional units, each with its own districts. According to participants, the management of VKV specialists differs across these units. Several participants noted being on a VKV on-call roster, while one participant shared being part of a WhatsApp group for VKV specialists in their unit. Such systems allow VKV specialists to take on work outside of their own teams and provide opportunities for professional development.

However, not all units operate under such practices, leading to confusion among some participants about their placement opportunities. For instance, one participant reported:

“There is a phone number you can call if you need a VKV specialist. I’ve never actually used it, so I’m not sure who would answer, but supposedly, they can tell you who the VKV specialists are. I believe there’s also a list where you can look up the names yourself.”

When units operate independently without a standardized approach, it not only causes confusion but also can hinder the professional development of VKV specialists. Some participants expressed a desire for more interview opportunities, mainly to maintain and improve their interview skills. Additionally, the lack of uniformity across units can hinder collaboration between units, especially in times of capacity shortages, when coordination between units would be beneficial. One participant shared:

“Within our unit, there are capacity issues regarding VKV specialists. The management of various departments does not seem to take responsibility for training VKV specialists. Additionally, there is no proper coordination for VKV. As a result, I feel there is insufficient support from leadership to conduct VKV interviews outside our own department.”

This quote highlights two needs: first, the need for supervisors to take greater responsibility in training police detectives, which could expand the pool of available VKV specialists; and second, participants’ desire for more opportunities to conduct specialized interviews. According to participants, failing to meet these needs creates barriers to the successful implementation of the VKV training.

Discussion

This study evaluated the Dutch VKV training program, designed to equip police detectives with the skills to effectively interview vulnerable suspects. The analysis is based on the perspectives and experiences of both alumni and current VKV trainees, providing insights into their subjective perceptions of the program. Overall, participants considered the training effective in enhancing both their theoretical understanding and practical skills in interviewing vulnerable suspects. In particular, the practice component was highly beneficial to trainees' development and contributed to boosting their confidence. However, some participants found the training challenging, particularly in balancing it with their work responsibilities. Despite these difficulties, intrinsic motivation and social support helped trainees overcome these challenges, although not all VKV specialists felt sufficiently supported. The following sections will discuss both specific adjustments to the VKV training program and broader conclusions that could guide the development of similar training programs.

Motivation

Trainees primarily enrolled in the VKV training due to intrinsic motivation, which is essential for achieving better learning outcomes and successfully transferring training to their job (Tonhäuser & Buker, 2016; Yang & Watson, 2020). However, external pressures, particularly the shortage of VKV specialists, occasionally influenced trainees' decision to enrol. This partially involuntary participation can negatively impact motivation (Gegenfurtner et al., 2016).

Throughout the program, trainees sometimes faced pressure from supervisors to remain available for work, making it difficult to balance professional responsibilities with training demands. Such workplace interruptions limit essential learning processes, including reflection and experimentation (Kyndt et al., 2013; Anselmann, 2022). Some trainees suggested an

uninterrupted or extended training program, both of which could improve motivation and learning outcomes (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). However, fully separating the VKV training from work obligations remains difficult due to the limited capacity of Dutch police interviewers, as trainees' absences would put additional pressure on the workforce (Braeckman, 2021). A more effective solution would be to balance the workload, which could reduce external pressures during both enrolment and the training itself. A manageable workload can enhance learning by encouraging trainees to develop new strategies to cope with tasks (Van Ruysseveldt & Van Dijke, 2011). In addition, fostering psychological safety and providing constructive feedback can further support motivation and learning (Bakker et al., 2022).

Despite the challenge of balancing work and training, trainees' motivation to learn remained stable. A key strength of the training, as perceived by trainees, was its similarity to real-world situations. Practicing with actors and interacting with vulnerable individuals were seen as closely resembling their tasks as interviewers, thereby enhancing the perceived usefulness of the training. Research shows that perceived training usefulness increases motivation to apply newly learned skills (Tonhäuser & Büker, 2016; Yang & Watson, 2020; Wang et al., 2021; Ford et al., 2018; Muduli & Raval, 2018; Martins et al., 2019). Motivation can be further strengthened by explicitly linking training content to trainees' roles as interviewers and encouraging trainees to set personal, job-related goals after completing the training (Sogunro, 2014; De Jong et al., 2024). These strategies can help trainees foster a sense of autonomy and strengthen the application of their newly acquired skills.

Knowledge and Skills

Most trainees valued the clear and comprehensive training content, which supported their professional and personal growth. However, some trainees felt confused about materials that were considered outdated or more appropriate for interviewing vulnerable witnesses rather

than suspects. This confusion likely stems from the limited research focused on interviewing vulnerable suspects compared to witnesses, resulting in a weaker evidence base for the former (Bull, 2011; Farrugia & Milne, 2012; Farrugia & Gabbert, 2019). While some aspects of witness interviewing, such as building rapport and adapting speech, can be applied to vulnerable suspects, interviewing vulnerable suspects often requires a different approach, especially when addressing inconsistencies in their statements (O'Mahony et al., 2012). This is because suspects tend to be more defensive, whereas witnesses are generally more cooperative (Vanderhallen et al., 2011). The study results suggest that trainees noticed the integration of best practices for interviewing vulnerable witnesses in the VKV training, which led to decreased confidence in interviewing vulnerable suspects. To better prepare detectives, training should focus specifically on best practices for vulnerable suspects. Further research is needed to establish evidence-based guidelines for this group.

Some trainees with prior experience in professional interviewing found the VKV training challenging, suggesting it may not align well with their background. In the Netherlands, the recently introduced Complex Interviewing training could serve as a bridge between basic interview training and the VKV training, as this program offers a more holistic approach to suspect and witness interviewing (Politieacademie, 2024). However, the one-size-fits all approach to training adopted by the Dutch Police Academy may limit effective learning for adults (Rothwell, 2020). In contrast, a five-tiered training model, implemented in other countries, better aligns police training with trainees' prior experiences (Milne et al., 2019). These models deliver the same content for each trainee but vary in design, offering different learning materials, activities, and levels of instruction (Smale-Jacobse et al., 2019; Bloomfield et al., 2024). Research indicates that individualized learning enhances learning efficiency and performance, especially for trainees with less prior experience (Milne et al., 2019; Fountoulakis, 2024; Richards & Omdal, 2007).

Despite its advantages, a tiered model may create disparities in training quality and opportunities, leading to inconsistencies in detectives' skill development (Colbert et al., 2017). To ensure effectiveness, trainers and curriculum designers must possess in-depth knowledge of the subject to understand the various learning levels within the field (Richards & Omdal, 2007). Trainers should also receive proper training, time, and resources to effectively support trainees (Schwab & Woltran, 2023). Furthermore, recruitment should assess not only cognitive abilities but also personality traits and interpersonal skills, which influence the development of interview competencies (Griffiths et al., 2011). By tailoring training to trainees' specific needs, they are better equipped with the resources and flexibility needed to develop both personally and professionally.

Practical Learning

The practice exercises offered in the training, particularly role-playing with actors, were considered the most valuable by trainees in learning new interview skills. However, many trainees believed that the training emphasized theory more than practice, creating a gap between abstract concepts and their application. Trainees' preference for practical learning aligns with previous research showing that police students generally prefer task-oriented methods that closely resemble their work (Hove, 2012; Keram, 2005; Silverstone et al., 2013; Krameddine & Silverstone, 2015).

Suspect interviewing requires a combination of intangible soft skills (e.g., communication, active listening, and rapport-building) and measurable hard skills (e.g., knowledge of procedures, interview strategies, and legal frameworks). While traditional learning methods, such as reading and listening to instructions, are effective for developing hard skills (Lista et al., 2022), soft skills are more challenging to learn and apply due to their context-dependent nature (Laker & Powell, 2011; Botke et al., 2018). Combining traditional methods with active learning strategies, such as role-playing, helps trainees better understand abstract concepts,

thereby supporting the development of both types of skills (Wang et al., 2021; Lista et al., 2022; Silverstone et al., 2013; Krameddine & Silverstone, 2015). Additionally, observational learning methods provide trainees with insight into the process without direct participation which influences their future actions (Bandura, 2001). To further strengthen the development of interview skills, immediate feedback during practice is essential (Krause et al., 2017; Hoel & Christensen, 2020; Bloomfield et al., 2024). By aligning the training design more closely with the specific skills required for suspect interviewing and focusing more on practical learning, training effectiveness can be improved.

However, alumni have indicated that they often refine their skills after starting their roles as VKV specialists. Their desire for additional practice may not stem from a perceived lack of competence, but rather from an awareness of the complexities of interviewing vulnerable suspects. Concerns about their abilities may drive trainees' desire for more practice, ultimately helping them build confidence in their skills.

Confidence

The findings indicate that some trainees continue to feel uncertain about their ability to prepare for and conduct interviews with vulnerable suspects due to insufficient practice. While a lack of confidence does not imply incompetence, it may lead to reduced effort and more errors on the job (Tims et al., 2014; Simosi, 2012). In contrast, increased confidence can enhance motivation and effort, thereby improving performance (Islam & Ahmed, 2018; Tims et al., 2014). As social cognitive theory suggests, confidence can be developed through task mastery, encouragement, and observing role models (Bandura, 1997, as cited in Lyons & Bandura, 2018). Incorporating these elements into the VKV training could help trainees build confidence in suspect interviewing.

Most alumni expressed a preference for receiving guidance after completing the VKV training to ensure alignment between their practices and job expectations, thereby building confidence. Supervisors and mentors are essential during this transfer phase, as their constructive feedback and ongoing support help in developing soft skills (Laker & Powell, 2011; Boere et al., 2023). When combined with interviewers' self-evaluations after their initial attempts at interviewing vulnerable suspects, this support reinforces confidence and positively influence the likelihood of application of the training (Blume et al., 2019). However, negative initial experiences in interviewing vulnerable suspects can undermine VKV specialists' confidence, thereby reducing the likelihood of further implementation of their acquired skills. This may help explain why some alumni continued to perceive a lack confidence, even after gaining work experience. To maintain and refine their interview competencies, VKV specialists must frequently engage with vulnerable suspects (Thielgen et al., 2022). Therefore, post-training support from supervisors or mentors and equal distribution of interview opportunities are recommended to enhance confidence.

Alumni also emphasized a need for structured intervision opportunities and refresher courses to validate their practices and build confidence. These interventions are particularly effective in supporting the retention and application of skills required for cognitively demanding tasks, such as interviewing vulnerable suspects (Akca et al., 2021). Offering structured intervision, guided by a professional coach, would allow detectives to expand their problem-solving skills and build confidence in managing complex cases (Jorissen et al., 2024; Brandmo et al., 2019; Van den Eertwegh & Stalmeijer, 2023). These findings highlight the importance of post-training support in ensuring the successful implementation of the VKV training.

Social Support

Overall, alumni felt supported by their colleagues and supervisors in their roles as VKV specialists, which has been shown to support confidence and skill development (Botke et al., 2018; Islam & Ahmed, 2018; Simosi, 2012; Thielgen et al., 2022; Bloomfield et al., 2024). Nevertheless, some alumni perceived a lack of recognition within their teams regarding the importance of specialized interviews, with some colleagues and supervisors questioning the necessity of formal training. While this occasional ignorance from colleagues or third parties frustrated alumni, it did not deter them from performing interviews with vulnerable suspects, as they viewed it as their responsibility. However, insufficient support can hinder detectives' ability to refine their practices, limiting their professional growth (Thielgen et al., 2022). More importantly, working with individuals who fail to identify vulnerabilities can hinder effective collaboration and even threaten the integrity of the investigation. For example, when Assistant Public Prosecutors (HoVJs) fail to recognize vulnerable suspects early in the process – whether due to prioritizing efficiency or lacking necessary knowledge – these suspects may be assigned to untrained interviewers (Vaughan et al., 2024; Lindeman, 2018). Research shows that untrained interviewers are more likely to make errors during specialized interviews than trained interviewers, making these interviews less effective and ethical (Cleary & Warner, 2016). As VKV specialists are the only trained professionals in the process of identifying and interviewing vulnerable suspects, this responsibility falls heavily on them. The findings indicate a need for greater organizational awareness of vulnerable suspects across the police force to distribute this responsibility and improve collaboration. Providing other departments with basic knowledge and tools to identify vulnerabilities early in the process could improve the quality of investigations and enhance collaboration between all parties involved. Ultimately, such efforts could lead to more effective outcomes and justice for vulnerable individuals.

Limitations and Strengths

Grounded in empirical literature, this study identified factors that influence the effectiveness of the VKV training. These insights are transferable to the design and delivery of training programs outside the context of police training. However, one limitation of this study concerns the exclusion of alumni who did not successfully complete the VKV training. The absence of data from these ‘dropouts’ may impact the evaluation of the training’s overall effectiveness, as understanding the factors that influence dropout is crucial for ensuring the transferability of the findings (Paul, 2015). Future research should investigate which elements and characteristics of the program and trainees are related to dropout to provide a more holistic evaluation.

A second limitation of this study lies in its dependence on participants’ self-evaluations of the training and their interview performance. Consequently, the preliminary findings lacked objective measures to evaluate the actual interview performances of trainees and VKV specialists. Self-reports tend to be more positive compared to evaluations conducted by colleagues or supervisors, potentially leading to biased responses (Schoeb et al., 2020). Moreover, responses may have been influenced by social desirability bias, partly due to the collaboration between the researcher and VKV trainers, which could have led participants to perceive a power imbalance (Reid et al., 2018). This study minimized these biases by implementing measures to protect participant privacy and anonymity, including the use of digital questionnaires, which increased the likelihood of obtaining honest responses (Neuman, 2011).

Building on these limitations, a natural next step would be to incorporate objective evaluation methods in future research. For instance, quantifying the number of appropriate questions asked during interviews, supplemented with behavioural evaluations conducted by

supervisors, interview coaches, or detective psychologists, would allow for a more comprehensive and objective evaluation of the VKV training's overall effectiveness.

Conclusion

This study identified both strengths and areas for improvement within the VKV training, as perceived by alumni and current trainees. While the training was considered to enhance competencies in interviewing vulnerable suspects, several aspects require attention. First, ensuring better alignment between the training and trainees' prior education is essential. This can be achieved by considering detectives' personal characteristics and interpersonal skills, as well as adopting a tiered learning approach. Additionally, a stronger balance between theory and practice is needed. Matching learning methods to the skillset of detectives can help bridge the gap between training and real-world application. However, a well-designed training program alone is insufficient if trainees lack social support or confidence in their abilities. Providing a supportive environment that includes individualized guidance from trainers, supervisors, and colleagues is crucial, as it not only builds confidence but also enhances performance. Furthermore, consistent deployment practices and opportunities for continuous development, such as structured intervision sessions, are essential for sustained professional growth and training success.

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Appendix A

Table 1

Content Captured at Each Evaluation Level

| Level | Content |
|--------------|---|
| Reaction | Satisfaction with the training Motivation for enrolling Engagement with the training Personal relevance of the training Cognitive abilities Goal setting Pre-training |
| Learning | Knowledge acquisition Skill development Changes in attitude Changes in confidence Changes in commitment Learning methods |
| Behaviour | Commitment to implementing the training Task variety Self-efficacy/confidence |
| Result | Social support Opportunities for learning on-the-job Feedback on acquired skills Supportive work-environment |

Note. The levels (left column) are based on Kirkpatrick and Kirkpatrick's (2022) evaluation model. The content (right column) is drawn from this model and supplemented with factors that affect training transfer.

Appendix B

Open-ended Questions from the Questionnaires

Table B1

Questionnaire for alumni participants

| Level | Question |
|-----------|---|
| Reaction | 1. We would like to gain more insight into the motivation of participants to enroll in the training. Can you explain your motivation at the time? |
| Learning | 2. Can you explain to what extent you think the training has contributed to improving your skills in interviewing vulnerable suspects? Are there other experiences that may influence your interview competences? 3. What important insights did you remember most from the training? |
| Behaviour | 4. Are there things that you personally apply, in addition to the methods learned from the training, to improve your expertise in interviewing vulnerable suspects? If yes, which ones? 5. In some situations, you can choose to transfer the interview to a more experienced VKV detective or other specialized interviewer. If this has been the case for you in the past, how often and for what reason did this happen? 6. What could the training have offered to increase your knowledge and sense of competence when interviewing different groups of vulnerable suspects? It can be helpful to think back on the training and your experiences before the training. |
| Results | 7. Can you describe the extent to which you experience support from your team, manager(s), and others within the organization to apply what you have learned in your daily work? Is this enough for you? 8. Is there anything else you would like to share? This can relate to both the training and its application during interviews. |

Table B2*Initial questionnaire for current cohort participants*

| Level | Question |
|--------------|---|
| Reaction | 1. We would like to gain more insight into the motivation of participants to enrol in the training. Can you explain your motivation? |
| Learning | 2. If you would like to provide an explanation about your current level of knowledge, you can do so below. Perhaps you can explain which signals of vulnerability you should pay particular attention to when preparing and conducting a suspect interview. |
| Behaviour | 3. What can the training offer you to increase your knowledge and sense of competence when interviewing different groups of vulnerable suspects? Perhaps consider possible additional information on specific topics, more practice situations, and so on. 4. In some situations, you can choose to transfer the interview to a more experienced VKV or other specialized interviewer. If this has been the case for you in the past, how often and for what reason did this happen? |
| Result | 5. Can you describe the extent to which you expect support from your team, manager(s) and others within the organization to apply what you have learned in your daily work? 6. What recommendations do you have so far for possible improvements for the VKV training? |

Table B3*Follow-up questionnaire for current cohort participants*

| Level | Question |
|--------------|---|
| Reaction | 1. How has your motivation to follow the VKV training changed during the program? What factors influenced these changes in motivation? |
| Learning | 2. Which aspect(s) of the training had the greatest impact on your understanding of interviewing vulnerable suspects? |
| Behaviour | 3. Which aspects of the VKV training most influenced your confidence in conducting interviews with vulnerable suspects? 4. What could the training have offered you to further enhance your knowledge and sense of competence in interviewing different groups of vulnerable suspects? Consider possible additional information on specific topics, more practice situations, social support, and so on. |
| Result | 5. What challenges do you anticipate, or have you already encountered, in applying what you learned in practice? 6. What recommendations do you have for potential improvements to the VKV training? 7. If there is anything else you would like to share about the VKV training, you can use the space below. This may relate to the training program itself or its application in practice. |

Appendix C

Initial Phase Interview Questions

Background

- Can you tell me a bit about your professional background at the Police (PV/VKGZ)?
- How did you hear about the study VKV?

Motivation

- What motivated you to participate in the study? (E.g. career advancement, interest in vulnerability, relevant for job, personal characteristics or skills, etc.)
- Was there a specific aspect of the study that attracted you?

Study material

- Do you feel that the study material covers all the necessary topics and skills needed for interviewing vulnerable suspects?
 - o Are there any topics that should be included in, or excluded from, the study material?
- How clear/understandable do you find the study material?
- How engaging do you find the study material?
 - o How has your motivation/interest (so far) been changed by the study, as compared to the beginning of the program?
- What are your thoughts about the additional resources provided? (E.g. books, files, demos of IQ/personality/psychological tests, digital learning environment)
 - o Which additional resources do you find most or least helpful?
- What are your overall impressions of the four-day internship of the study?
 - o In what ways do you think the internship is relevant for your work?

Goals and expectations

- What do you hope to accomplish by participating in the VKV study?
 - o Are there any personal or professional goals you aim to achieve?
 - o Did you formulate your goals at the beginning of the study program?
- What are your expectations from the VKV study in terms of outcomes and benefits?
 - o Have these expectations been met so far?

Practical points

- How do you manage to balance the study schedule with your work responsibilities?
 - o What can be done to make the study schedule align with your work schedule?
- What is your opinion on involving both groups (PV/VKGZ) in the study and sharing background information?
 - o How relevant do you find the background information shared by both groups?
 - o How do you experience two groups being together in the study?

Post-study plans

- How do you intend to apply what you have learned from this study in your work?
 - o What might help you develop a clearer vision of application of the study materials?
 - o Do you have any worries or concerns about applying the study?
- What kind of support would you expect to receive from your team/supervisor after completing the study?

Recommendations

- What do you think the Police Academy could do to make the VKV study more attractive to a wider range of participants?
- Would you recommend this study to your colleagues? Why (not)?
- What recommendations do you have for the Police Academy that would improve the study?

Appendix D

Follow-up Interview Questions

General

- How would you describe your experience participating in the VKV training?
- To what extent did the training meet your expectations?
- What aspects of the training stood out to you in particular?

Motivation

- What motivated you to enrol in the training program?
- Did your motivation to learn about vulnerable suspects change throughout the course?
 - o If so, in what ways? If not, what did you do to maintain motivated?

Training materials

- Do you think the materials offered in the training touched upon all important aspects needed to interview vulnerable suspects?
- What elements of the training did you find most satisfying, and are there areas where you feel improvements could be made?
- What do you think of the clarity and the usefulness of the training materials?
- Which resources did you find most helpful? And which ones were less helpful?
 - o E.g. books, files, videos, psychological tests.
- What value did the 2-day internship had for you in learning to interview vulnerable suspects?

Goals and results

- Did you set a specific goal (or goals) at the beginning of the program?
 - o If you'd like to share, what goals did you set? (personal/professional)
- Looking back, did you gain the results you aimed for?
- What are your thoughts on the exams and assignments?

Expectations

- How do you plan to apply the learned materials in your job as an interviewer?
- Do you have any concerns about applying the materials in the field?
- What would help you to make that transition to work? (e.g. a clear plan, support from colleagues, guidance from a VKV specialist?)
- What social support do you expect from your team and supervisor in interviewing vulnerable suspects?
- In what ways do you believe a structured mentorship program could enhance your interviewing skills in the initial stages as VKV specialist?

Recommendations

- Would you recommend the training to your colleagues?
- Do you have any further recommendations for improvement of the VKV training program?

Appendix E

Consent Form Questionnaires

Purpose of the research

The purpose of this research is to evaluate the training Interviewing of Vulnerable Suspects, offered by the Police Academy. With this research we hope to reveal areas for improvement from the perspective of detectives who are currently following the training. The aim of this research is to increase the effectiveness and practical applicability of the training.

How do we work?

Information for this research will be collected by means of a digital questionnaire that you can complete via your smartphone or laptop. The questionnaire consists of a number of closed questions and statements, supplemented with open questions. We would very much appreciate it if you answered all questions carefully and truthfully. Both positive and negative feedback is appreciated as it can be valuable in evaluating the training. You don't have to answer questions you don't want or can't answer. Your answers will not affect your further participation in the training, as only researchers will see your answers. To get a complete picture of your experiences, we ask you to complete a questionnaire again at the end of the training period. More information about this will follow later.

Potential risks and discomforts

There are no psychological, physical, legal or economic risks associated with your participation in this study. Your participation is voluntary and you can decide to stop at any time. We only ask for minimal demographic information so that your answers are not personally identifiable and to guarantee your anonymity.

Benefits of Participation

There is no compensation for participating in this study. However, your participation is very important to improve the quality of the training, so that interviewers are better able to adapt their interview to vulnerable suspects in practice.

Confidentiality of data

We do everything we can to protect your privacy as best as possible. After collecting the data, your information is immediately anonymized. Answers to open-ended questions will be paraphrased before results are shared to ensure that your answers cannot be traced back to you. The final report that is published will be completely anonymized, so that it cannot be determined who provided specific information. The information collected within this research is stored at a secure location of the

University of Twente and on the researchers' secure (encrypted) data carriers. The anonymized research data will be kept for a period of 10 years, in accordance with the Research Management Regulations. After this period has expired, the data will be deleted. If necessary (for example for a check on scientific integrity), the research data will only be made available in anonymous form to people outside the research group. The collected research data will be shared with the Police Academy solely for the purpose of the investigation.

Voluntariness

Participation in this research is completely voluntary. You can choose to stop participating or refuse to have your data used for the study at any time, without having to give a reason. Stopping participation will not have any negative consequences for you. If you decide during the study to no longer cooperate, the data you have already provided will be excluded from the study.

Contact

Do you want to stop the research, or do you have questions and/or complaints? Please contact the research leaders:

Hannah Wessels: aghwessels@student.utwente.nl

Laura Dekker: lkdekker@student.utwente.nl

Contact information for internship supervisors University of Twente:

Lynn Weiher: lweiher@utwente.nl

Steven Watson: sjwatson@utwente.nl

For questions regarding the role of the Police Academy, please contact:

Imke Rispens: imke.rispens@politieacademie.nl

Martijn van Beek: martijn.van.beek@politieacademie.nl

This research has been reviewed and approved by the ethics committee of the University of Twente. This research is carried out by the Faculty of Behavioural, Management and Social Sciences of the University of Twente. If you have specific questions about the handling of personal data, you can contact the Data Protection Officer of the UT by sending an email to dpo@utwente.nl. For objections regarding the design and/or implementation of the research, you can contact the Secretary of the Ethics Committee of the BMS faculty at the University of Twente via ethicscommittee-hss@utwente.nl. Finally, you have the right to submit a request to the research leaders for access, modification, deletion or adjustment of your data.

By signing this consent form, I acknowledge the following:

1. I have been sufficiently informed about the research by means of a separate information sheet. I read the information sheet and then had the opportunity to ask questions. These questions have been sufficiently answered.

☐ Yes (1)

☐ No (2)

2. I voluntarily participate in this study. There is no explicit or implicit compulsion for me to participate in this study. It is clear to me that I can terminate my participation in the study at any time, without giving a reason. I don't have to answer a question if I don't want to.

☐ Yes (1)

☐ No (2)

Appendix F

Consent Form Interviews

Information Sheet: VKV Evaluation Interview

You are invited to participate in a study conducted by Laura Dekker on behalf of the University of Twente (UT) in collaboration with the Police Academy in Apeldoorn. Your participation is entirely voluntary.

Purpose of the Study

The aim of this study is to address questions based on the digital survey “Evaluation of the VKV Training” to gain insights from the perspective of interviewers who are also trainees of the Vulnerable Suspect Interviewing (VKV) course. By doing so, I hope to better understand your experiences with the training and identify potential areas for improvement. Evaluating the training can contribute to enhancing its overall effectiveness.

Procedure

If you agree to participate, you will be interviewed via Teams. The interview will take approximately 30 to 45 minutes.

Potential Risks and Discomforts

There are no physical, legal, economic, or psychological risks associated with participating in this study. You are not required to answer any questions you do not wish to answer. Your participation is voluntary, and you may withdraw from the study at any time without providing a reason.

Data Confidentiality

Your privacy will be fully protected. No confidential information or personal data will be disclosed. The interview will be conducted via Teams, during which the conversation will be recorded. The responses collected for this study will be stored in a secure location at the University of Twente and on the researcher’s encrypted storage devices. The research data will be retained for a period of 10 years. After this period, the data will be deleted. If necessary (e.g., for scientific integrity checks), research data may be shared with individuals outside the research team, but only in anonymized form. Lastly, this study has been reviewed and approved by the Ethics Committee of the BMS Faculty (Domain Humanities & Social Sciences).

Contact

If you have any questions and/or complaints, please contact l.k.dekker@student.utwente.nl or the project supervisors from the University of Twente: Steven Watson (s.j.watson@utwente.nl) or Lynn Weiher (l.weiher@utwente.nl).

If you have any objections regarding the design or execution of the study, you can contact the Secretary of the Ethics Committee/Domain Humanities & Social Sciences of the Faculty of Behavioural, Management and Social Sciences at the University of Twente via ethicscommittee-hss@utwente.nl. This research is being conducted by the University of Twente, Faculty of Behavioural, Management and Social Sciences. If you have specific questions about the handling of personal data, you can direct them to the Data Protection Officer of the UT by emailing dpo@utwente.nl.

By granting permission, I acknowledge the following:

1. I have been adequately informed about the study and have read the information sheet.
2. I am voluntarily participating in this study. I understand that I can withdraw from the study at any time, without providing a reason. I am not required to answer any question if I do not wish to.
3. I give permission for the data collected from me during the study to be processed as outlined in the information sheet. This permission also applies to the processing of my demographic information.
4. I give permission for the research data collected from me to be stored and used for future research and educational purposes. I consent to the above-mentioned points.

Signature:

Date of signature:

Appendix G

Acknowledgement of AI Usage

During the preparation of this work the author used ChatGPT (2024) for brainstorming and to refine the structure and clarity of the text. After using this tool, the author reviewed and edited the content as needed and takes full responsibility for the content of the work.