



Investigating the interplay between the reported witnessing and experiencing of physical violence within the home, the death of a parent or sibling, stress-sensitivity, and reported false confessions in males



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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the interplay between the reported witnessing and experiencing of physical violence within the home, the death of a parent or sibling, latent stress-sensitivity levels, and reported false confessions in males. Data were obtained from 5394 male students in further education in Iceland. Zero-inflated negative binomial models were fitted, showing that reported levels of physical violence within the home and the death of a parent or sibling significantly increased the likelihood of reported false confessions. Latent stress-sensitivity interacted with both reported levels of physical violence and the reported experience of the death of a parent or sibling, strengthening the effect of such adverse experiences on the likelihood no false confessions reported. Trait stress-sensitivity therefore appears to increase susceptibility to external influences, and may be a critical factor in predicting the likelihood of false confessions, for a variety of reasons, in young males. Stress-sensitive male interviewees may find it harder to adapt and adjust following adversity, and harder to deal with their emotions during police questioning, rendering such detainees more vulnerable and at risk.

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1. Introduction

Despite advancements in police interviewing methods, what still has not improved is the identification rates of psychological vulnerability of suspects in police custody (see Young, Goodwin, Sedgwick, & Gudjonsson, 2013). Young et al. (2013) cited the 1993 Royal Commission's finding of 35% of detainees that could be considered vulnerable, affecting their ability to cope with the police interview (Gudjonsson, Clare, Rutter, & Pearse, 1993). Studies of police detainees does not take into account all potential suspects within the general population that could be less able to cope with the pressure of questioning, due to the possession of subtle inherent psychological characteristics that render them more susceptible to external influences (including the pressure of police questioning) (see Drake, Bull & Boon, 2008; Drake, Gudjonsson, Sigfusdottir, & Sigurdsson, 2015). Research into identifying the most important predictors of the tendency towards false confessions therefore remains relevant to current practice, and helps to improve our understanding of why general population

individuals can also be highly susceptible (and at risk) during police questioning.

Child development, longitudinal, cohort-studies have consistently shown the adverse effects of contextual risk factors, such as neighbourhood deprivation, negative parenting (including violence, abuse and neglect), and parental divorce and conflict, on the development of emotional and behavioural problems across the life-span (e.g. Bradley & Corwyn, 2008; Drake, Belsky, & Fearon, 2014; Flouri, Tzavidis, & Kallis, 2010). Some cross sectional studies have also documented significant associations between the reporting of negative life events and both interrogative suggestibility and reported false confessions during police questioning (e.g. Drake & Bull, 2011; Gudjonsson, Sigurdsson, & Sigfusdottir, 2009; Gudjonsson, Sigurdsson, Sigfusdottir & Asgeirsdottir, 2008).

Using undergraduate samples, Drake et al. (2008) and Drake and Bull (2011) showed significant correlations, in particular, between the reporting of negative life events and sensitivity to pressure during questioning. In these studies, the *negative life events* composite measure consisted of items asking whether or not a person has been a victim of bullying, whether they had witnessed family conflict, physical abuse, and parental divorce. Gudjonsson et al. (2009) also reported that witnessing and/or experiencing physical violence within the home, where an adult was involved, the death of a parent or sibling were the

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strongest predictors of false confessions – for boys, especially. Based on this body of literature, it might therefore be concluded that a history of exposure to such environmental adversities may be a critical indicator of the likelihood of false confessions.

It has also been documented though that not all individuals are equally as susceptible to the effects of adversity, with studies showing striking variation in psychological adjustment in response to the experience of a range of contextual risk factors (see Belsky, 2013 for a literature review). Phenotypic stress-sensitivity (indicated by high scores on characteristics such as nervousness, tension, negative emotionality and fearfulness) is what appears to act as the susceptibility factor (rather than a history of exposure to environmental adversities), with stress-sensitive individuals not only being disproportionately more susceptible to the effects of negative (risk) influences, but thriving disproportionately more in their absence or in the presence of protective/positive/supportive environmental influences. Drake et al. (2015) showed that stress-sensitive interviewees were more likely to report a false confession, owing to heightened physiological responsiveness towards and a negative perception of situations and social encounters. The effect of witnessing or experiencing physical violence within the home, where an adult was involved, and the death of a parent or sibling on the likelihood of false confessions occurring may therefore, in fact, depend upon the stress-sensitivity of the interviewee.

Furthermore, although results are mixed in this area, evidence is emerging of a gender difference in the psychological consequence of being stress-sensitive: compared to insecure-disorganised attachment in girls (insecure-disorganised attachment being a product of negative parenting influences, and the breakdown in the attachment system; Bowlby, 1988), insecure-disorganised boys, also scoring high on shyness and behavioural inhibition, which can manifest as consistent fearfulness and withdrawal from unfamiliar situations or objects, have been shown to exhibit higher levels of internalising problems, such as anxiety (including social anxiety), depression, and to suffer greater levels of social rejection and peer-exclusion (see Lewis-Morrarty et al., 2015). Windfuhr et al. (2013) also found that young males were more vulnerable to mental health problems than females. Gudjonsson et al. (2009) also found that reported false confessions in boys to be most strongly linked with witnessing or being involved in physical abuse at home and the death of a parent or sibling. It might therefore be the case that those boys, with a history of exposure to physical violence and the trauma of losing a parent or sibling may also have scored highly on stress-sensitivity; and that it was their stress-sensitivity that rendered those boys significantly more susceptible to the adverse experiences, and more vulnerable to false confessions.

The aim of this study is to investigate the role of stress-sensitivity in the effect of a reported history of: (a) exposure to physical violence, within the home, where an adult is involved and (b) the death of a parent or sibling on the likelihood of reporting false confessions, in males. It is hypothesised that exposure to physical violence, within the home, where an adult is involved and the death of a parent or sibling will directly increase the likelihood of reported false confessions. It is also hypothesised that as levels of inherent stress-sensitivity increase, the effect of the experience of (a) exposure to physical violence, within the home, where an adult is involved and (b) the death of a parent or sibling on reported false confessions will strengthen significantly.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

The sample comprised of 5394 male students, aged between 18 and 24 years old, in further education in Iceland. Age-wise: $N = 4$ (0.1%) 18 years old, $N = 5$ (0.1%) 19 years old, $N = 1793$ (32.2%) were 20 years old, $N = 1791$ (32.2%) were 21 years old, $N = 1755$ (32.5%) were 22 years old, $N = 13$ (0.2%) were 23 years old, and $N = 2$ (<0.1%) were 24 years old. $N = 31$ did not indicate their age.

The data used in the study come from a national *Youth in Iceland* programme of surveys that have been conducted, in Iceland, by the Icelandic Centre for Social Research and Analysis for the past 17 years. All students attending junior colleges on the day of the survey were invited to take part in the survey. The participants have 80 min (two school lessons) to complete the questionnaires and seal them in blank envelopes. The data collection is conducted in accordance with the Privacy and Data Protection Authority in Iceland, including anonymity and participants' informed consent by and under the direction of the Icelandic Centre for Social Research and Analysis. Participation is voluntary and students were not paid.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. False confessions (see Gudjonsson, Sigurdsson, & Asgeirsdottir, 2008)

False confessions data were obtained through participants being asked if they have ever been interrogated by the police at a police station, and how they reacted to being questioned, including whether or not they had ever made either a confession or false confession. Participants were asked: (1) 'How often have you been interrogated at a police station as a suspect in a criminal offence' – Never, Once, Twice, 3–5 times, 6 or more times? (Only tick one column in each category); (2) 'Did you commit the offence?' ('Yes' or 'No'); and (3) 'Have you ever confessed during police interrogation to a criminal offence that you did not commit?' The reply was rated on the five-point scale: 'Never', 'Once', 'Twice', '3–5 times', '6 or more times'. Participants who indicated that they had falsely confessed were also asked to categorise the reasons for the false confession, by being asked: "What was the reason for you confessing to something you did not do?"; participants had to select from the following reasons: to cover up for somebody else, due to being threatened, due to police pressure, [they] wanted to get away from the police, [they were experiencing] alcohol/drug withdrawal, [they were] taking revenge on the police, cannot remember the reason, and other.

2.2.2. Negative Life Events scale (see Drake et al., 2015)

Negative Life Events scale was used to collect data on participants' reported history of: witnessing physical abuse at home involving an adult, experiencing physical abuse at home involving an adult, and whether a parent or sibling had died. Participants answered yes/no in response to whether or not they had experienced those events: (a) over the past 30 days, (b) over the past 12 months, and (c) more than 12 months ago. A composite score was then created, summing participants' responses. Scores therefore ranged between 0 and 3. The internal reliability of the scale (α) is .79.

2.2.3. Nerves, fearfulness and tension

Nerves, fearfulness and tension scores were derived from three items chosen from the Symptom Check List-90 (Derogatis, Lipman, Covi, & Rickels, 1971). Participants were asked how often, in the past 30 days, have you been feeling: (i) nervous/anxious; (ii) scared for no reason; and (iii) tense? The items were rated on a four-point frequency scale ('never', 'seldom', 'sometimes' and 'often') to indicate severity of symptoms.

2.3. Analytical strategy

Given the zero-inflated negative binomial distribution of the false confessions outcome variable, random intercept, zero-inflated negative binomial (ZINB) models were fitted to the data, using MPlus software (Muthén & Muthén, 2012). ZINB models are used for modelling count variables (false confessions, in this study) where there are excessive zeros. Within the ZINB model there are two parts: (i) a count model, which predicts the probability of a false confession being reported, and follows a negative binomial distribution, and (ii) a logit model, predicting the probability of no false confessions being reported, and relating the covariates in the model to the absence of false confessions

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