



## Short Communication

## Guilt-proneness is a marker of integrity and employment suitability

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## ABSTRACT

Guilt-proneness (GP) is an individual difference characterized by a tendency to feel bad about committing transgressions. We investigated how law enforcement job candidates' guilt-proneness relates to their employment suitability, history of employment and legal problems, and counterproductive tendencies. By demonstrating relationships between GP and variables important for personnel selection and organizational functioning, this work highlights the potential utility of measuring this trait in applied settings where researchers and/or practitioners wish to gauge the integrity of respondents with a personality-based test. In light of its ability to predict employment suitability and counterproductive tendencies, the five-item guilt-proneness scale (GP-5) may prove to be a useful measure for pre-employment integrity assessment for public safety occupations, as well as other occupations where honesty and accountability are everyday concerns.

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Guilt-proneness (GP) is an individual difference characterized by a tendency to feel bad about committing transgressions. People with high levels of GP anticipate that they would feel guilty about their behavior if they were to do wrong, whereas those with low levels anticipate no such negative feelings about bad behavior. Highly guilt-prone employees commit fewer deviant behaviors, and this relationship holds when controlling for other known correlates of counterproductivity, such as interpersonal conflict at work, intention to turnover, negative affect, and gender (Cohen, Wolf, Panter, & Insko, 2011; Cohen, Panter & Turan, 2013; Cohen, Panter, Turan, Morse & Kim, 2013; Cohen, Panter, Turan, Morse, & Kim, 2014). In general, people who are more guilt prone have a stronger sense of responsibility to others, which contributes to them being judged as better leaders (Schaumberg & Flynn, 2012), more committed to their jobs (Flynn & Schaumberg, 2012), and less likely to take advantage of other people (Wiltermuth & Cohen, 2014). Guilt-proneness measured in fifth-graders predicts illegal behavior during young adulthood and involvement in the criminal justice system at ages 18 to 21 (Stuewig et al., 2015).

Despite the growing literature on GP and moral character, research has yet to examine this trait in high-stakes personnel selection settings where individuals' responses could have consequences for their future employment. The goal of this report is to address this concern by

providing evidence of how guilt-proneness is a marker of integrity and employment suitability using data from a study of law enforcement job applicants in the state of Colorado who were required to undergo psychological screening by their hiring authority. Specifically, we investigated the viability of measuring guilt-proneness for personnel selection by examining how it relates to law enforcement job candidates' employment suitability, history of employment and legal problems, and counterproductive tendencies. By testing the relationship between guilt-proneness and variables important for personnel selection and organizational functioning, our goal is to highlight the potential utility of measuring this trait in applied settings where researchers and/or practitioners wish to gauge the integrity of respondents with a personality-based test.

## 1. Method

The sample consisted of 155 job applicants applying for work with law enforcement agencies in Colorado over an eight-month period. Colorado requires law enforcement applicants to undergo psychological evaluation as part of the hiring process, and many agencies require psychological testing for commissioned and non-commissioned positions. Unlike other settings where the applicant's self-report may be biased, incomplete, or outright misleading, the subjects in this sample knew their responses to biographical questions would be cross-referenced using resources that include criminal databases, employment records, third-party data, and truth verification procedures (i.e., structured polygraph or computer voice stress analysis).

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Applicants completed all the measures and an interview (lasting 45 min or more) in one day in a controlled test environment under supervision of a psychologist. As part of the assessment, all participants responded to the five-item guilt-proneness scale (GP-5; Cohen, Kim & Panter, 2014).<sup>1</sup> Seven response options were provided, anchored at *extremely unlikely* (1) and *extremely likely* (7). A sample item is: “You lie to people but they never find out about it. What is the likelihood that you would feel terrible about the lies you told?” GP was calculated by averaging participants' responses to the five items.

The alpha coefficient was lower in this sample ( $\alpha = .54$ ) than in prior studies (cf.  $\alpha = .80$  in Cohen, Panter, et al., 2014), possibly because there was less variance and the range was restricted to the positive end of the response scale. Despite this, model fit statistics from a confirmatory factor analysis were very good and factor loadings were acceptably high (Table 1). Moreover, we observed variability among respondents, allowing us to examine the GP-5's relationships with other measures included in the evaluation battery.

The evaluation battery included a 13-page Personal History Questionnaire (PHQ). For this research, we focused on applicants' employment history, legal history, and drug history. For employment history, participants were asked to indicate the number of times they were fired or forced to leave a job (not including layoffs) and the number of times they received work-related warnings or disciplinary actions. We tested whether GP was correlated with whether the applicant had ever been fired from a job (0 = *never fired*, 1 = *fired 1 or more times*), as well as whether they had ever received a warning or disciplinary action at work (0 = *never received a warning or disciplinary action*, 1 = *received 1 or more warnings or disciplinary actions*). Legal history information included: number of arrests, summons, suspensions or revocation of one's license, moving citations within the last five years, and involvement in motor vehicle accidents during the past five years regardless of fault. We created a sum-scored composite of the number of arrests, summons, and driver's license suspensions, and another sum-scored composite of traffic tickets and accidents during the past 5 years. Drug history was assessed by asking participants to indicate whether they had ever tried or used illegal drugs (i.e., cannabis, opiates, methamphetamine or stimulants, ecstasy, cocaine, analgesics, CNS depressants, and illegal steroids). We created a sum-scored illegal drug use composite of the number of different classes of illegal drugs the applicant reported trying.

The Shipley Institute of Living Scale-2 (SILS-2) is a timed measure of cognitive functioning that consists of two parts: a 10-minute vocabulary test and a 12-minute problem-solving test (Shipley, Gruber, Martin, & Klein, 2009). We report the SILS-2 results to show evidence of discriminant validity.

The California Psychological Inventory (CPI-434) is a self-report measure of personality that contains 434 items (Gough, 1996). We expected GP to correlate with many of the Class II and Class III scales, but not necessarily the Class I and Class IV scales. We also examined Vector 3 of the CPI, which captures overall growth, development, and integration of one's personality, and places people in one of seven different levels of ego integration. People at lower levels of integration (levels 1 and 2) are described as distressed, unfulfilled and opposed to the culture they live in. Individuals scoring at level 4 and above are increasingly at harmony with their culture, feel useful and have limited difficulty coping with life.

The counterproductive tendencies (Cp) scale is a composite of 80 CPI items, with the majority drawn from the Self-Control (Sc), Socialization (So), and Responsibility (Re) scales from Class II. As described by Hakstian et al. (2002, p. 60), the Cp scale represents an “underlying individual-difference personality constellation” that predicts “a multifaceted constellation or syndrome of behaviors that are detrimental to the objectives of the organization and/or work group—dysfunctional

**Table 1**

Confirmatory factor analysis of the five-item guilt proneness scale (GP-5).

Model fit	
$\chi^2$ (df = 5)	3.25
RMSEA (90% C.I.)	.000 (.000, .089)
CFI	1.00
TLI	1.02
Weighted root mean square residual (WRMSR)	.289
Item	Factor loadings (with standard errors)
(1) Too much change	0.56 (0.09)**
(2) Secret felony	0.65 (0.10)**
(3) Cover wine spill	0.85 (0.06)**
(4) Tell lies	0.86 (0.07)**
(5) Break the copier	0.58 (0.10)**

Note.  $N = 155$ . All p-values are two-tailed tests. A one-factor solution with WLSMV estimation was calculated.

\*\*  $p < .001$ .

behaviors such as property theft, drug and alcohol abuse, dishonesty, disruptiveness, failing to meet standards, absenteeism, tardiness, and withholding effort.” Higher scores indicate a greater predisposition toward counterproductive behaviors and lower scores indicate a greater predisposition toward constructive and responsible behaviors.

The candidate's overall suitability for the job was determined by a practicing public-safety psychologist. Though arguably subjective, this rating is based not only on psychometric data and biographical data, but also the candidate's ability to answer questions about his or her history during the interview, the candidate's demonstrated maturity and candor, as well as the psychologist's professional judgment. The rating is based on evidence-based principles of Structured Professional Judgment (SPJ), and similar assessments have been used in past research in police and public safety (Sarchione, Cuttler, Muchinsky, & Nelson-Gray, 1998). Ratings are communicated using a five-point scale such that candidates rated a 1 or 2 are below average and are not recommended for hire. Candidates rated a 3 are considered average (some strengths and some potential risk factors) and are suitable for hire. Candidates rated 4 are above average and those rated a 5 are highly recommended. A simple numerical rating cannot capture all facets of a psychological evaluation, but ratings do help to clarify communication with the client organization and streamline the decision-making process.

Although the applicants' responses to the individual guilt-proneness items were included in the PHQ and therefore available to the psychologist while conducting the interview and formulating a final rating, the scores were not incorporated as part of the decision making process, and total composite scores were not computed until after the candidate suitability ratings were made. It is possible that the psychologist's judgment could have been implicitly contaminated by having access to candidates' responses to the individual items but the possibility of such contamination is minimal in our view. From a practical standpoint, use of an applicant's guilt-proneness score would have been difficult because the psychologist did not have knowledge of applicants' total scores nor the scale's descriptive statistics. Without access to such information, and given the complication of potential differences between this sample and others that have been used in previous research, the psychologist had no benchmark for making any determinations about candidates' guilt-proneness based on the individual item responses that were embedded in the 13-page questionnaire.

## 2. Results & discussion

Although we observed considerably higher scores and a more limited range in this sample, we nonetheless found that GP was correlated with variables important to employee selection (Tables 2 & 3). A Multivariate Analysis of Covariance (MANCOVA) with GP entered as a

<sup>1</sup> The fifth item in the scale was added after data collection for this study had begun. As a result, we have missing data on this item for 56 participants.

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