



An investigation into the relationship between the reported experience of negative life events, trait stress-sensitivity and false confessions among further education students in Iceland [☆]



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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the interplay between the reported experiences of negative life events, reported levels of nerves, fear and tension experienced over the past 30 days, and reported false confessions. Data were obtained from 11,388 students in further education in Iceland, out of which 5439 participants were male and 5837 were female. Single level, random intercept, structural equation models were fitted showing that latent stress-sensitivity, indicated by levels of nerves, tension, fear, and the number of negative life events experienced exerted a significant direct effect on the likelihood of false confessions. Stress-sensitive interviewees (those reporting high levels of nerves, fear, tension and negative events) may be more susceptible to environmental influences, due to heightened physiological responsiveness towards and a negative perception of situations and social encounters, with false confessions being a direct consequence of this. A suggestion from the findings is that the type of false confession (the reason for it) may possibly dependent upon which contextual trigger has influenced the interviewee the most – those within the police interview itself and/or pressures from the wider environment within which they reside.

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1. Introduction

Research into the factors that might increase the risk of false confessions is important, as it further increases our understanding of why false confessions occur, and facilitates the revision and improvement of both police interrogation methods as well as procedures aimed at identifying vulnerable interviewees (Gudjonsson & Pearce, 2011; Kassin et al., 2010; Young, Goodwin, Sedgwick, & Gudjonsson, 2013). In spite of the implementation of the PEACE model in England and Wales, which is thought to produce fewer false confessions than the Reid Model commonly used in the USA (Gudjonsson & Pearce, 2011; Kassin et al., 2010), there remains a general failure to identify psychological vulnerabilities within detainees (Young et al., 2013).

Some cross sectional studies have documented significant associations between the reporting of certain negative life events

and the emergence of false confessions during police questioning (e.g. Gudjonsson, Sigurdsson, & Sigfusdottir, 2009; Gudjonsson, Sigurdsson, Sigfusdottir, & Asgeirsdottir, 2008; Gudjonsson, Sigurdsson, Sigfusdottir, & Young, 2012). In these studies, the *negative life events* measure is a composite variable, encompassing items measuring whether or not a person has been a victim of bullying, witnessed family conflict, physical abuse, parental divorce, and/or suffered a serious illness themselves or within their family. Higher scores on the negative life event scale may increase the likelihood that people are not able to cope effectively with stressful situations, such as police questioning, which [thus] may lead to an increased risk of internalisation of any interviewer coercion (such that the suspect becomes convinced that they did in fact perpetrate the offence) or compliance (the suspect going along with the interviewer, confessing due to a desire to get out of custody).

Other research within the child development and applied forensic field, has triggered a need to re-investigate the direct association between the experience of negative life events and false confessions (Belsky & Pluess, 2009; Drake, 2014; Gudjonsson, Sigurdsson, Asgeirsdottir, & Sigfusdottir, 2006; Gudjonsson et al., 2012; McGroarty & Thompson, 2013): (i) Belsky and Pluess

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(2009) review a whole body of child development research implicating latent trait stress-sensitivity (observed via a variety of phenotypes, such as anxiety, nervousness, fearfulness and/or negative emotionality/temperament) in heightening child- susceptibility to their environmental influences (with increased adverse consequences for mental health if those influences are negative); (ii) Gudjonsson et al. (2006) noticed that the false confessors within their sample of secondary school children displayed higher levels of emotional disturbance and anxiety compared with the other participants; (iii) Gudjonsson et al. (2012) also argue that, although the experience of negative events is a significant contributing factor to false confessions in ADHD sufferers, what weakens their resilience to pressure is their condition [ADHD], which is associated with susceptibility factors key in the pathogenesis of anxiety and negative emotionality (Gizer, Ficks, & Waldman, 2009); (iv) When it comes to susceptibility to suggestions and pressure, associated with internalised and compliant false confessions, McGroarty and Thompson (2013) found that the experience of negative life events was not significantly correlated with interrogative suggestibility (including susceptibility to pressure), but found instead that negative emotional states (associated with neuroticism) was; and (v) Drake (2014) also found that the direct effect of the reported experience of negative life events on susceptibility to misinformation was only statistically significant at high levels of participant trait anxiety.

It could well be the case that latent stress-sensitivity levels moderate the effect of the reported experience of negative life events on the likelihood of false confessions. High trait stress-sensitivity levels may increase susceptibility to coercion and/or social pressure (not just during police questioning, but within the wider environment in which individuals reside), increasing the likelihood of false confessions as a result of threats from others, covering for someone else, the desire to avoid and escape the perceived stressfulness of the police interview (compliant false confessions), and, when it comes to internalised false confessions, a greater likelihood of misinformation acceptance (Gudjonsson, Sigurdsson, Sigurdardottir, Steinthorsson, & Sigurdardottir, 2014).

On the other hand, the processing of experiences has been shown to depend on two correlated, yet independent, systems: (i) a biological system, responsible for governing the degree of physiological arousal in response to situations/events (manifest in individual differences in tension, nervousness, fearfulness experienced); and (ii) a cognitive-interpretive component, affecting the extent to which situations/events are interpreted as positive or negative. Negative life event scores, to an extent, may reflect this cognitive-interpretative aspect of the processing of situations. In order to rate an event as negative, there first has to be a negative interpretation of that event (see Hervé, Cooper, & Yuille, 2013 for a review of the literature). It could instead be the case that the reporting of negative life events and scores on the levels of nerves, fearfulness and tension reportedly experienced indicate a common latent (stress-sensitivity) factor, which exerts a direct effect on the likelihood of false confessions emerging (see Gudjonsson et al., 2012, 2014). The reporting of negative life events tends to correlate significantly with trait anxiety and other facets of stress-sensitivity (Drake, 2014).

The aim of this study is to investigate the interplay between: (a) the reported experience of negative life events; (b) the levels of fearfulness, nerves, and tension reportedly experienced; and (c) reported false confessions. Two models will be tested and compared: In model 1: Latent stress sensitivity, indicated by the reporting of negative life events, nerves, fearfulness and tension scores, will exert a significant, positive, direct effect on the likelihood of false confessions emerging. The higher the stress-sensitivity scores, the more likely a false confession will be reported. In model 2: The significant, positive, direct effect of the reported

experience of negative life events on the likelihood of a false confession being reported is moderated by latent stress-sensitivity levels, indicated by scores on nerves, fearfulness and tension experienced. The direct effect of the reported negative life events on false confessions will only be significant at high levels of latent stress-sensitivity.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

The total sample consisted of 11,388 students in further education in Iceland, out of which 5439 participants were male and 5837 were female ($N = 112$ did not indicate their gender). Age-wise: $N = 3095$ (28%) 16 years old or younger, $N = 2590$ (23%) 17 years old, $N = 2238$ (20%) were 18 years old, $N = 1749$ (16%) were 19 years old, and $N = 1306$ (12%) were 20 years old or older. $N = 410$ 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 et al., 2008, 2012)

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 first asked: 'How often have you been interrogated at a police station as a suspect in a criminal offence?' (Only tick one column in each category): 'Never', 'Once', 'Twice', '3–5 times', '6 or more times'. Following this, they were asked: "Did you commit the offence?" (To which participants answered either 'Yes' or 'No'). Participants were then asked: 'Have you ever confessed during police interrogation to a criminal offence that you did not commit (i.e., you had nothing to do with the offence and are completely innocent)?' 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 (Gudjonsson et al., 2012)

Participants answered yes/no in response to whether or not they had experienced the following 12 negative life events: You have experienced a serious accident, you have suffered serious illness, your parents are divorced or separated, you have had serious arguments with your parents, you have witnessed a serious argument between your parents, you have witnessed physical abuse

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