



Interrogative suggestibility: Life adversity, neuroticism, and compliance

Kim E. Drake*

School of Psychology, University of Leicester, Lancaster Road, Leicester LE1 9HN, UK

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the relationship between the number and intensity of negative life events experienced (nNLE and iNLE respectively), neuroticism (N), compliance (C), and interrogative suggestibility on the Gudjonsson Suggestibility Scale 1 (GSS 1). Participants ($N = 127$) completed the GSS1, the Life Events Questionnaire, and the NEO Personality Inventory-Revised. Results show that nNLE correlates significantly with both Yield 1 and Yield 2. Blended models including iNLE and N as independent variables, C as the mediator, and GSS scores as dependent variables provide the most acceptable accounts of GSS scores. The models demonstrate that: (i) the effects of iNLE, N and C on Yield 1 are not statistically significant, (ii) iNLE (but not N or C) exerts a significant and positive direct effect on Yield 2, and (iii) iNLE, N and C exert significant and positive direct effects on shift scores. Findings suggest that answer-shifting on the GSS may result from a negative mindset within interviewees, a desire to alleviate distress, and from compliant tendencies in response to feelings of uncertainty and expectations of success. They further imply that false confessions, in interviewees reporting iNLEs, could also result from compliance with interviewer-pressure or negative feedback during questioning.

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1. Introduction

Interrogative suggestibility can be a serious psychological vulnerability during police investigative interviews (see Gudjonsson, 2003; Gudjonsson, Sigurdsson, & Bragason, 2008; Gudjonsson, Young, & Bramham, 2007). In the light of concern over securing reliable convictions and protecting vulnerable individuals during questioning, research into interrogative suggestibility is important.

Factor analytic evidence suggests two types of interrogative suggestibility: (i) The acceptance of misleading information measured by the Yield 1 and Yield 2 subscales of the Gudjonsson Suggestibility Scale (GSS; Gudjonsson, 1984, 1987) and (ii) sensitivity to the negative feedback/interrogative pressure from the interviewer, measured by the shift subscale of the GSS.

Evidence shows an association between the reporting of intensely negative life events (iNLEs) and interrogative suggestibility (Drake & Bull, accepted for publication; Drake, Bull, & Boon, 2008). Reporting iNLEs was found to be particularly linked with sensitivity to negative feedback. When controlling for memory recall accuracy (see Drake et al., 2008), the significant correlations between iNLEs and the three subscales of the GSS remain. Further research investigating the link between NLEs and interrogative suggestibility seems therefore warranted. What is also unclear about the (Drake & Bull, accepted for publication; Drake et al., 2008) studies is whether the relationship between the reporting

of iNLE and relatively high GSS scores may be in fact attributed to trait compliance (especially in response to the negative feedback incorporated into the GSS interview), rather than suggestibility.

Trait compliance has been demonstrated across situations (Gudjonsson, Sigurdsson, Einarsson, & Einarsson, 2008). The reporting of iNLEs may be an observable manifestation of a relatively negative mindset within relatively suggestible interviewees (Drake, Egan, & Bull, submitted for publication; Safford, Alloy, Abramson, & Crossfield, 2007). Gudjonsson and Clarke (1986) recognise the importance of this negative mindset in encouraging high scores on the GSS. An underlying negative mindset has been found to predict negative life events and stress generation (Safford et al., 2007). Compliance may be viewed as an ineffective coping mechanism during tasks perceived as stressful or interpersonal conflict (Costa & McCrae, 1992). Evidence suggests further that individuals tending towards a negative mindset can sometimes be more prone to experiencing more frequent NLEs and vice versa (due to a self-fulfilling prophecy and depending on their level of cognitive hardiness; Beasley, Thompson, & Davidson, 2003; Cohen, Burt, & Bjorck, 1987). Both the reporting of iNLEs and nNLEs may therefore be related and lead to compliant behaviour.

Interviewees who display higher levels of trait compliance can also be more suggestible (Richardson & Kelly, 2004). Compliance could therefore manifest during the GSS interview and mediate the relationship between the reported experience of NLEs (frequency and intensity) and GSS scores. The first objective is to investigate compliance in the relationship between nNLE and iNLE and interrogative suggestibility.

* Tel.: +44 1332 593054.

E-mail address: ked6@le.ac.uk

The role of neuroticism (N) in the relationship between nNLEs and iNLEs, compliance, and GSS scores will also be explored: evidence relates N to the experience of more frequent NLEs (Magnus, Diener, Fujita, & Pavot, 1993). This may be because individuals high in N conduct their lives in such a way as to encourage interpersonal stressors (Elander, West, & French, 1993). N appears to relate to stress generation and the experience of more NLEs, which seems to be the precipitant of a negative cognitive set (NCS) within such individuals (Safford et al., 2007). This NCS may encourage ineffective coping mechanisms (e.g. compliance) during interview (Gudjonsson, 1995) due to heightened uncertainty and expectations of success (Gudjonsson & Clarke, 1986). Correcting erroneous interviewer suggestions may be perceived to lead to a negative outcome (for interviewees scoring high on N and reporting frequent NLEs). Research shows that N is linked with a decreased tendency towards risk-taking behaviour (Maner et al., 2007). This may lead to compliant behaviours during GSS questioning as a result of heightened uncertainty and expectations of success, leading to relatively high Yield 1 scores.

N also reflects a susceptibility to distress (Costa & McCrae, 1992). This enhanced negative mindset (Safford et al., 2007) seems to encourage the exaggeration of negative experiences (Fraley & Shaver, 2000; Nofle & Shaver, 2006). Such individuals seem to report previous negative events as more intensely negative. N may be related to the reporting of more iNLEs (as well as nNLE), which may reflect a NCS within such interviewees. During interview, this NCS may lead to high levels of uncertainty, expectations of success (Gudjonsson & Clarke, 1986), and thus ineffective coping (e.g. compliance). These factors may lead to higher Yield 1 scores.

It appears especially that negative feedback may enhance state anxiety and the perceived difficulty of the interview (McGroarty & Baxter, 2007). Individuals scoring high on N (and reporting iNLEs) may perceive and interpret the feedback more negatively. Sensitivity to the negative feedback during the GSS interview may manifest as compliance, surfacing in response to a perceived increase in task-difficulty from the first to the second round of GSS questions (Costa & McCrae, 1992; McGroarty & Baxter, 2007). Higher yield 2 scores and answer-shifting may result.

1.1. Hypotheses

1.1.1. Yield 1

nNLE reported, iNLE reported and N are hypothesised to correlate significantly in the positive direction. Compliance may fully mediate the relationship between the observed independent variables nNLE, iNLE and N and the dependent variable yield 1. nNLE, iNLE and N are expected to exert a significant and positive direct effect upon C, which in turn is expected to exert a significant and positive direct effect upon yield 1.

1.1.2. Yield 2 and shift

nNLE reported, iNLE reported and N are hypothesised to correlate significantly in the positive direction. C may fully mediate the relationship between nNLE, iNLE, N and both yield 2 and shift scores. However, it is expected that only iNLE and N may exert significant positive indirect effects on both yield 2 and shift.

2. Methods

2.1. Participants

The sample consists of 127 participants, 78 females and 49 males (mean age = 21.28 years, standard deviation = 5.18). All participants were either undergraduates, recruited through the experimental participation scheme within the School of Psychology, or members

of the public through the School of Psychology's participant panel. All participants were educated to high school level or beyond.

3. Instruments

3.1. The Gudjonsson Suggestibility Scale 1 (Gudjonsson, 1984)

The GSS was presented to each participant individually as a memory task. Several functions may be measured within the task: (i) immediate and delayed recall; (ii) confabulation; and (iii) suggestibility. Participants are read a narrative describing a fictitious robbery, followed immediately by an "immediate" free-recall phase, a distracter phase of around 50 min, and then a "delayed" free-recall phase.

3.2. Interrogative suggestibility

The questioning phase begins immediately after the delayed free-recall condition. Responses to the first round of 15 misleading questions (out of a total of 20 questions) provide the yield 1 score which indicates the number of misleading questions yielded prior to negative feedback. (The answers to five 'true questions' does not contribute to this score.) Immediately after the first round of 20 questions, negative feedback is given by the interviewer. The interviewee is told "You have made a number of errors, and it is therefore necessary to go through all of the questions once more and this time try to be more accurate". The 20 questions are then repeated to see how readily interviewees shift their initial answers as a result of the critical feedback given by the interviewer. A yield 2 score is then obtained (showing the number of misleading questions yielded to post-negative feedback) and an answer "shift" score. The interview phase of the GSS generates three measures of suggestibility:

- (1) *Yield 1*. For each of the misleading questions that are answered in the affirmative the first time round, or in the case of false alternative questions where one of the alternatives is chosen, one Yield point is obtained. Thus, the range of possible Yield 1 scores is from 0 to 15.
- (2) *Yield 2*. This is scored in an identical manner to Yield 1, following administration of the negative feedback. Once again, the range is 0 to 15.
- (3) *Shift*. Changes in response to any of the 20 questions (i.e. including the five 'true questions'), after their administration the second time, contribute to the 'shift' score. According to Gudjonsson (1997), the only changes in answers not coded as such are those from "no" to non-committal responses (i.e. do not know, not sure, maybe, possibly, or other synonymous words) or vice versa. The 'shift' score can range from 0 to 20.

3.3. Life Events Questionnaire (LEQ) (Norbeck, 1984)

The LEQ contains 82 items in total and is a modification of the instrument developed by Sarason, Johnson, and Siegel (1978), in that it has nine items of particular relevance to women. These include items such as "Major difficulties with birth control pills or devices". The nine additional items in the LEQ were introduced to reduce the gender bias in the Sarason et al. (1978) version. Participants were required to go through all the events listed, and if they had experienced them at any point of their life, to circle whether it had been a "good" experience or "bad" experience. They were then instructed to rate the extent to which those events had an effect on their lives at the time. The ratings went from 0 ("no effect") to 3 ("large effect"). The LEQ has good test-retest reliability, with test-retest reliabilities

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