



Pergamon

Archives of Clinical Neuropsychology
17 (2002) 223–233

Archives
of
CLINICAL
NEUROPSYCHOLOGY

Malingering on the RAVLT Part II. Detection strategies

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Accepted 17 January 2001

Abstract

In this study two potential indices of malingering derived from the Rey Auditory Verbal Learning Test (RAVLT) were evaluated as a means of detecting malingering. These were indices based on discrepancies between recognition–recall scores and differences in the serial position effect (SPE). Sixty undergraduate students were randomly assigned to one of four conditions: malingerers, malingerers-with-warning, warning-only, and control. Incentives were offered to participants in all conditions to encourage faking in a believable manner (malingering conditions), or to encourage optimal performance (nonmalingering conditions). Two predictions were made. First, it was predicted that the serial position curve for subjects in malingering conditions would show suppression of primacy effects relative to nonmalingerers. Second, it was predicted that recall would be better than recognition for subjects in malingering conditions compared to nonmalingering conditions. The utility of these indices was also explored in the context of providing subjects' with warnings regarding use of methods to detect malingering. Results indicated that both indices failed to reliably differentiate between malingerers and nonmalingerers, and warnings failed to modify participants' behaviour. © 2002 National Academy of Neuropsychology. Published by Elsevier Science Ltd.

Keywords: Neuropsychology; Malingering; RAVLT; Serial position effect

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1. Introduction

There is a growing body of literature reflecting attempts to identify and improve malingering detection strategies in a neuropsychological context (see Heubrock & Petermann, 1998 for a recent review). For example, methods of detection that have been investigated previously include attempts to identify discrepancies in information provided at interview, during testing, and through observation, as well as attempts to examine test scores to determine the presence of atypical patterns of performance (Haines & Norris, 1995; Rogers, Harrell, & Liff, 1993). Atypical patterns of performance that have been investigated for their potential to distinguish malingerers from nonmalingerers include below-chance performance and performance that deviates from patterns produced by reliable cognitive phenomenon (e.g., absence of priming effects, serial position effects (SPEs), or higher rates of recall than recognition on memory tasks). This paper focuses on the absence of SPEs and atypical discrepancies between recognition–recall as a means of detecting malingering.

2. Serial position effects

SPEs are typically found on verbal list learning tasks and describe a pattern of results that can be consistently demonstrated in healthy adults (Haberlandt, 1997). That is, when asked to recall a list of words, the first and last third of a list are more likely to be remembered than words from the middle of the list. The increased likelihood of recall of words from these positions produces a U-shaped pattern of results that is indicative of primacy and recency effects.

Differences in SPEs have been explored as a means of detecting malingering previously. For example, Bernard (1991) showed that SPEs differentiated malingerers from nonmalingerers on the Rey Auditory Verbal Learning Test (RAVLT). Malingerers were found to suppress recall of words in the first third of the list, demonstrating significantly reduced primacy effects relative to nonmalingerers. The rationale for exploring the SPE as a tool for detecting malingering is based on the nature of this phenomenon. That is, as an index of implicit memory function, serial position curves usually occur beyond the awareness of the person completing the memory task, and as such, can be reliably demonstrated. Therefore, the absence of SPEs might indicate an attempt to consciously modify responses, producing an atypical pattern of results.

Studies attempting to replicate Bernard's (1991) finding of reduced primacy effects among malingerers have yielded contradictory results. For example, a later study conducted by Bernard, Houston, and Natoli (1993) found no significant differences in SPEs between simulators and controls. Although malingerers performed significantly worse than controls on the RAVLT, results from both groups conformed to the U-shaped curve that is characteristic of normal primacy and recency effects. Similarly, Flowers, Sheridan, and Shadbolt (1996) showed that serial position curves for malingerers and nonmalingerers had the same shape, and groups could not be differentiated based on a comparison of SPEs. Given this inconsistent pattern of results, it is unclear to whether the analysis of SPEs can be used to detect malingering, or more specifically, to identify deliberately poor performance.

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