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The effects of motivation, coaching, and knowledge of neuropsychology on the simulated malingering of head injury

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Abstract

Two student groups, introductory psychology ($n = 91$) and advanced neuroscience ($n = 34$) undergraduates, were asked to malingering a head injury on Rey's 15-Item Test (FIT) and Dot Counting Test (DCT). The participants were randomly assigned to one of three motivation conditions (no motivation given, compensation, avoidance of blame for a motor vehicle accident) and to one of three coaching conditions (no coaching, coaching post-concussive symptoms, coaching symptoms plus warning of malingering detection). Analyses revealed a Motivation \times Student Group interaction on the FIT, indicating that the advanced neuroscience students, particularly when in the compensation condition, malingered the most flagrantly. On the DCT, main effects for motivation and coaching on the qualitative variables and a Motivation \times Coaching interaction on the accuracy variables indicated that those in the compensation condition performed the most poorly, and that coaching plus warning only tempers malingering on memory tasks, not timed tasks.

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1. Introduction

Simulation experiments in the malingering of head injury have provided valuable information about how normal individuals would feign brain damage. It has been shown, for instance,

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that malingerers generally overestimate the impairments associated with head injury (e.g., Coleman, Rapport, Millis, Ricker, & Farchione, 1998; Guilmette, Hart, & Giuliano, 1993; Iverson & Franzen, 1998; Mittenberg, Azrin, Millsaps, & Heilbronner, 1993), often display unusual error patterns on neuropsychological tests (Benton & Spreen, 1961; Osimani, Alon, Berger, & Abarbanel, 1997), produce more believable results on symptom checklists than on clinical tests (Martin, Hayes, & Gouvier, 1996), and perform worse on more obvious neuropsychological tasks than subtle ones (Bernard, McGrath, & Houston, 1996).

Despite limitations to their direct generalizability to clinical practice, simulated malingering experiments have contributed to the development of new measures to detect malingering (Davis, King, Bloodworth, Spring, & Klebe, 1997; Schagen, Schmand, de Sterke, & Lindeboom, 1997; Tombaugh, 1997), and have suggested the use of cut-off scores (Arnett, Hammeke, & Schwartz, 1995; Iverson & Franzen, 1996) and qualitative test profiles (Hiscock, Branham, & Hiscock, 1994; Iverson, 1995; Mittenberg, Theroux-Fichera, Zielinski, & Heilbronner, 1995) that inform practitioners and help them to detect “real world” malingering. There remain, however, methodological issues in simulated malingering studies which require standardization, and several variables whose impact on malingering behavior have not yet been investigated.

1.1. Motivation

Participants in simulated malingering studies are often given a role to play during the assessment. The description of the role may include the motive of the participant to fake a head injury. The typical motive is a hypothetical sum of money from a personal injury settlement, the amount of which has been demonstrated to be unimportant (Bernard, 1990; Martin, Bolter, Todd, Gouvier, & Niccolls, 1993). Alternately, several studies have used an “avoiding blame” motive in which participants were instructed to perform on tests in order to avoid “serious trouble” rather than gain compensation (Iverson, 1995; Iverson, Franzen, & McCracken, 1994); however, these studies did not employ a compensation group with which to compare their results.

A comparison of motivations is important as it has been shown that the scripts given to participants in simulated malingering experiments affect the manner in which the participants mangle (Arnett et al., 1995). Indeed, in clinical practice, the motivations for malingering head injury are myriad and if litigation scenarios can be considered analogous to experimental scripts, how different motivations affect neuropsychological test performance must be investigated. In non-experimental malingering studies, it has been shown that litigants perform more poorly on neuropsychological tests than similarly or more severely injured non-litigants (Binder & Willis, 1991; Lee, Loring, & Martin, 1992; Meyers & Volbrecht, 1998). Determining patterns of performance based on the type of secondary gain available to the participant or patient may ultimately be helpful in identifying malingering in clinical settings.

1.2. Coaching

Participants in simulated malingering studies may also be given “coaching” instructions on how to fake a believable head injury. However, simulated malingering research has not

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