



Denial of risk: The effects of positive impression management on risk assessments for psychopathic and nonpsychopathic offenders



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ABSTRACT

Risk assessments for offenders often combine past records with current clinical findings from observations, interviews, and test data. Conclusions based on these risk assessments are highly consequential, sometimes resulting in increased criminal sentences or prolonged hospitalization. Therefore, many offenders are motivated to intentionally minimize risk factors and their negative consequences. Positive impression management (PIM) is especially likely to occur in offenders with high psychopathic traits because goal-directed deception is reflected in several of psychopathy's core traits of the disorder, such as manipulativeness, glibness, and superficial charm. However, this connection appears to be based on the conceptual understanding of psychopathy, and has rarely been examined empirically for either frequency of or success at deception. The current study examined the ability of a jail sample to intentionally minimize risk factors and related criminal attributes using a repeated measures, simulation design. In general, offenders were able to effectively use PIM to lower scores on the HCR-20 and the Self-Appraisal Questionnaire (SAQ), while the Psychological Inventory of Criminal Thinking Styles (PICTS), as a measure of cognitive styles, was more resistant to such minimization. Psychopathic traits, especially high Factor 1 scores (i.e., affective/interpersonal), were associated with greater PIM. Important differences in the willingness and ability to use deception were found based on the (a) mode of administration (i.e., interview vs. self-report) and (b) level of psychopathy as measured by the Psychopathy Checklist – Revised (PCL-R). The important implications of this research are discussed for risk assessment procedures regarding likely areas of deception and its detection. The current research also informs the growing literature on the connection between psychopathic traits and deception.

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1. Introduction

Research on the “nothing works” thesis (Martinson, 1974) led to a de-emphasis of rehabilitation and a concomitant focus on the incapacitation of violent and habitual criminals. The reasons for this wide-sweeping change in philosophy and the subsequent changes in law are multifaceted and beyond the scope of this article. However, this increasing shift toward incapacitation has led to a parallel rise in the need for accurate risk assessment, with Simon (2005) indicating that the acceptance and use of risk assessment procedures is unprecedented in the history of forensic psychology. In 2009, 2.3 million adults were incarcerated in US jails and prisons, and more than double that number were on probation or parole (U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, & Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2010). Moreover, the recidivism rate for violent crime remains high; with 59.6% of all offenders being rearrested and 39.9% reconvicted within three years of release (U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, & Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2002). The exponential growth of risk assessment is clearly

connected to this recidivism, as well as the increasing number of incarcerated individuals with mental health treatment needs. Outside of the criminal arena, tightened civil commitment standards have required mental health professionals to weigh the potential risk posed by released prisoners and/or psychiatric inpatients.

2. Positive impression management

Clearly, psychologists have a vested interest in developing strategies for risk assessment that are not susceptible to positive impression management (PIM), yet little research has examined this important factor. Only two studies could be located examining PIM during risk assessment. Both studies investigated offenders' performance on a self-report risk assessment questionnaire, the Self-Appraisal Questionnaire (SAQ; Loza, 2005). Loza, Loza-Fanous, and Heseltine (2007a) compared responses under two conditions: (a) presumably genuine (i.e., confidentiality-guaranteed instructions) and (b) presumably intentional minimization (i.e., instruction about the test findings being used to determine early release). Contrary to expectations, the scores in the real evaluation group were slightly higher on scales measuring substance use and past criminal conduct. As underscored by these

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results, the use of a differential prevalence design is weak, because it assumes the motivation for each group (see Rogers, 2008). A second study by the same research group (Loza, MacTavish, & Loza-Fanous, 2007b) used a within-subjects simulation design based on the debatable assumption that all participants would respond honestly with “research only” instructions, and then intentionally minimize their risk factors with “release evaluation” instructions. The scores did not change significantly between conditions. The authors interpreted these results as a sign that participants were not being deceptive; however, without a manipulation check it is difficult to know whether or not they attempted to be deceptive.¹

3. Psychopathy and deception

Deception is a common occurrence in many different settings, especially when the incentives are high (Frank & Ekman, 2004). Nowhere is this observation truer than in forensic settings. Likewise, psychopathy appears to be a particularly influential factor for frequency and success of deception. However, despite the large independent literatures on psychopathy and deception, few studies have been published on the association between these two concepts.

The intuitive appeal of a link between psychopathy and deception is undeniable, with the latter term considered a key characteristic of prototypical psychopathy. On this point, Cleckley's (1941) model of psychopathy listed “untruthfulness and insincerity” as a core feature, while Hare's (1991) model contained the variant of “pathological lying.” Beyond direct characterizations of deception, descriptions of psychopathy include several core features indicative of deceptive practices, such as superficial charm, manipulateness, and shallowness. Deceptive features are also implied because psychopathic individuals are characterized as exploitative of others, which often requires lying and finesse at conning. Moreover, various forms of deception are also required in the successful commission of most crimes and the subsequent avoidance of apprehension. Beyond the prevarications of ordinary criminals, psychopaths characteristically use conscious distortions and manipulations across multiple domains of their lives, leaving no interpersonal relationship unaffected (Cleckley, 1976).

Studies have found that psychopaths are not actually any more successful at being deceptive, even though they may do so more frequently than nonpsychopaths (Clark, 1997; Lykken, 1978; Patrick & Iacono, 1989; Raskin & Hare, 1978). At least in one experimental situation, Cogburn (1993) found that psychopaths were actually less successful than nonpsychopaths at deceiving others when attempting to persuade interviewers that they had engaged in either socially desirable or undesirable behaviors. Importantly, they were rated as less credible whether they were lying or being presumably honest. Klaver, Lee, Spidel, and Hart (2009) generally supported Cogburn's findings and concluded in their own study that psychopathic offenders do not exhibit superior deception skills when judged by laypersons.

While no studies of psychopathy's connection to impression management could be located, one study analyzed the closely related concept of socially desirability. Book, Holden, Starzyk, Wasylkiw, and Edwards (2006) studied participants who successfully portrayed socially desirable personality (i.e., were not detected by the validity scale cut scores) on the Holden Psychological Screening Inventory (HPSI; Holden, 1996). As expected, successful deceivers had significantly higher psychopathy scores than those detected as faking.

4. Current study

In the last two decades, the use of risk assessment measures has exploded (Yang, Wong, & Coid, 2010), but the vulnerability of such measures to positive impression management has remained untested.

These procedures include both actuarial (e.g., VRAG and LSI-R) and structured clinical judgment (HCR-20 and PCL-R) measures.

The accuracy of all risk assessments can potentially be thwarted by intentional minimizations, especially by offenders with psychopathic traits, whose core characteristics include deception and manipulateness (Cleckley, 1976; Hare, 2003). As noted above, no studies exist examining how effectively offenders with psychopathic traits can lower their risk assessment scores. The current study addresses this gap.

5. Methods

The research utilized a mixed simulation design with both within and between components. For the within-subject component, each offender was administered two conditions. In the standard (e.g., honest responses) condition, genuine appraisals of psychopathy and risk were established. In the experimental condition, instructions for positive impression management were used. For the between-subjects component, moderate-high and low psychopathy groups were established via the PCL-R (see below for classification criteria) and compared to each other. Independent variables included (a) genuine level of psychopathic traits (low and moderate-high psychopathy groups), and (b) assessment method (interview vs. paper and pencil risk assessment formats). The dependent variables included scale scores on the (a) HCR-20, (b) SAQ, and (c) PICTS.

6. Classification of psychopathy groups

Two groups were created based on PCL-R scores: A “low” group composed of those at or below 18 and a “moderate-high” group of those 20 and above. Although Hare (2003) has recommended a PCL-R cut-score of 30 for classifying psychopaths in high-security prison settings, high levels of psychopathy were not expected in the current jail setting. Past studies in settings other than high-security institutions have used cut-scores ranging from 17 to 29 (DeMatteo, Heilbrun, & Marczyk, 2006; Harris, Rice, & Quinsey, 1993; Serin, 1991, 1996). The current cut-score based on the mean (19.1) in a minimum security inmate sample from the 2nd edition manual of the PCL-R (Hare, 2003).

7. Participants

The initial sample consisted of 90 male offenders recruited from the general population at Tarrant County Jail in Fort Worth, Texas. Although gender differences are an important subject in the field, the choice was made to focus on males at this early stage of an emerging topic. Only inmates with felony charges and/or recent behavioral problems were selected, because (a) moderately high levels of psychopathy were needed for the study, and (b) risk assessment is most relevant for offenders with serious criminal charges. In addition, participants had to have at least an 8th grade reading level to ensure adequate comprehension of instructions, as well as the PICTS and SAQ.

8. Materials

8.1. Instructional sets for simulation research

As recommended by Rogers (2008), all instructions in this study were written at a relatively low reading grade level (Flesch-Kincaid grade level = 6.5 for both sets). Each participant received instructions for the honest and PIM phases. During the honest condition, detainees were assured confidentiality to avoid the belief that they were in an adversarial situation with possible real-world negative consequences. During the simulation condition, instructions involved the intentional minimization of their risk factors.

The simulation design utilized a scenario involving a pre-sentencing evaluation and instructions to appear as a defendant posing very low risk of re-offending. This scenario was selected because nearly all

¹ Rogers (2008) stresses the importance of manipulation checks for all simulation design studies.

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