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A national study into temperament as a critical susceptibility factor for reported false confessions amongst adolescents

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the extent to which hyperactivity and anxiety predicts susceptibility to false confessions compared with inattention and anti-social behavioural tendencies. The sample was comprised of 11,388 young people – 5439 males and 5837 females - in further education, split into three age groups: 14–16, 17–19 and 20–24 years of age. Ordinal logistic regression models show hyperactivity to be a significant predictor of reported false confessions across age. Whilst latent inattention is a significant predictor in the youngest group (aged 14–16), that effect diminishes significantly in the older age groups. Latent anxiety seems not to exert a significant effect across age. Antisocial behaviour (ASB) however does seems to exert a significant effect on false confessions across age. Given that recklessness and impulsivity are facets of conduct disorder, it may be the recklessness and impulsive component of ASB that is most relevant in predicting false confessions across age. Latent hyperactivity may therefore be the critical susceptibility factor for false confessions across adolescence. Such a finding is novel, and raises significant questions about the potential vulnerability of adolescents scoring high on hyperactivity when questioned by police.

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1. Introduction

False confessions plague the criminal justice system (Cutler, Findley & Moore, 2014; Gudjonsson, 2010; Kassin et al., 2010). Despite some innovations in police interviewing techniques, the risk of detainee/suspect vulnerability going unnoticed and resulting in false confessions remains a problem for the justice system (Young, Goodwin, Sedgwick & Gudjonsson, 2013). Procedures, guidelines or questioning techniques used by police or in Court are also unlikely to completely guard against differences in interviewer competence/influence. On the other hand, by focusing on identifying and monitoring characteristics within suspects that increase the risk of false confessions, such a risk may well be reduced (Belsky & Pluess, 2009; Drake, Gudjonsson, Sigfusdottir and Sigurdsson, 2015, Drake, Sigfusdottir, Sigurdsson and Gudjonsson, 2015). Research is now needed therefore to investigate, and understand, what the critical endogenous susceptibility factors are within vulnerable suspects. This paper builds upon research into anxiety, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) symptoms (see Young et al., 2015), and both suggestibility and false confessions (see Gudjonsson et al., 2008), and considers the novel idea that suspect temperament may be more strongly predictive of susceptibility to false confessions than other cognitive and/or behavioural traits.

Temperament can be defined as "constitutional differences in reactivity and self-regulation" (Rothbart and Derryberry, 1981, p. 37). Temperamental indices such as fearfulness, nervousness, and hyperactivity, have been identified as a fundamental susceptibility factors, responsible for increased malleability in the face of external influence (Belsky & Pluess, 2009; Belsky and Pluess, 2013). As such, children, adolescents and even adults scoring high on such temperamental indices are not only the ones most adversely affected by negative experiences (e.g., harsh punishment, negative life events), as long presumed, but are also the ones most likely to benefit from positive/supportive ones (e.g., nurturance, enrichment, understanding) (Belsky & Pluess, 2009)

Hyperactivity and susceptibility to anxiety (indicated by nerves, fear and tension levels) may thus constitute critical susceptibility factors for false confessions (see Belsky & Pluess, 2009). The results of a recent study on 22,226 young people found that Attention-deficit-hyperactivity-disorder (ADHD) symptoms increased the likelihood of false

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confessions (Gudjonsson et al., 2016; also see Gudjonsson et al., 2008; Gudjonsson et al., 2012), with ADHD predicting arrest, conviction and incarceration over-and-above conduct disorder (Young et al., 2013). Authors of such works concluded that both inattention and hyperactivity may undermine youths' ability to cope during questioning. However, a possibility is that false confessions in ADHD groups may actually be the result of increased susceptibility to external influences (due to hyperactivity and co-morbid tendencies towards anxiety) (Martel & Nigg, 2006; Musser et al., 2011; Sizoo, Van der Gaag & Van den Brink, 2015). During interview, such temperamental indices may render individuals more susceptible to – and less able to cope with – pressure, and inclined to blurt out answers before questions have been completed and/or talk excessively, culminating in false confessions in some cases. Child development research indicates that hyperactivity as well as anxiety are indicators of stress-sensitivity and can operate as a differential susceptibility factor, making hyperactive individuals highly responsive to environmental influences (Belsky & Pluess, 2009).

This raises the possibility that by attending to latent hyperactivity and anxiety, a reduced risk of false confessions may follow during interviews perceived as stressful by the detainee or suspect. After all, sensitivity to arousal is a central component of emotional processing, which has been identified as a central factor predicting accuracy of memory (Hervé, Cooper & Yuille, 2013). Data gathered on almost 5400 Icelandic males from further education/upper secondary school indicates that the experience of physical violence in the home contributes to the risk of providing false confessions—when suspects also experience high levels of stress (i.e., stress sensitivity; Drake, Gudjonsson et al., 2015, Drake, Sigfusdottir et al., 2015); such associations between stress-sensitivity and an increased risk of false confessions also emerges in other studies (see Drake, Gudjonsson et al., 2015; Drake, Sigfusdottir et al., 2015).

The aim of this study is to investigate the critical susceptibility factors for reported false confessions across age. It is predicted that latent anxiety (indicated by reported nerves, fear and tension levels) as well as latent hyperactivity levels will be significant predictors of reported false confessions.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

The sample was comprised of 11,388 young people in further education at college. The mean age for the total sample (496 did not give their age) was 16.4 years (SD = 1.9; range 14–24 years). There were 5439 males and 5837 females (112 did not give their gender). Participants were categorised into three age groups in this study: 14–16 (n = 3095), 17–19 (7139), and 20–24 (n = 658).

The data used in the study come from the 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 upper secondary school on the day of the survey were invited to take part in the survey. The participants had 80 min (two school lessons) to complete the questionnaires and seal them in blank envelopes. The data collection was conducted in accordance with the Privacy and Data Protection Authority in Iceland, including anonymity and participants" informed consent by and under the direction

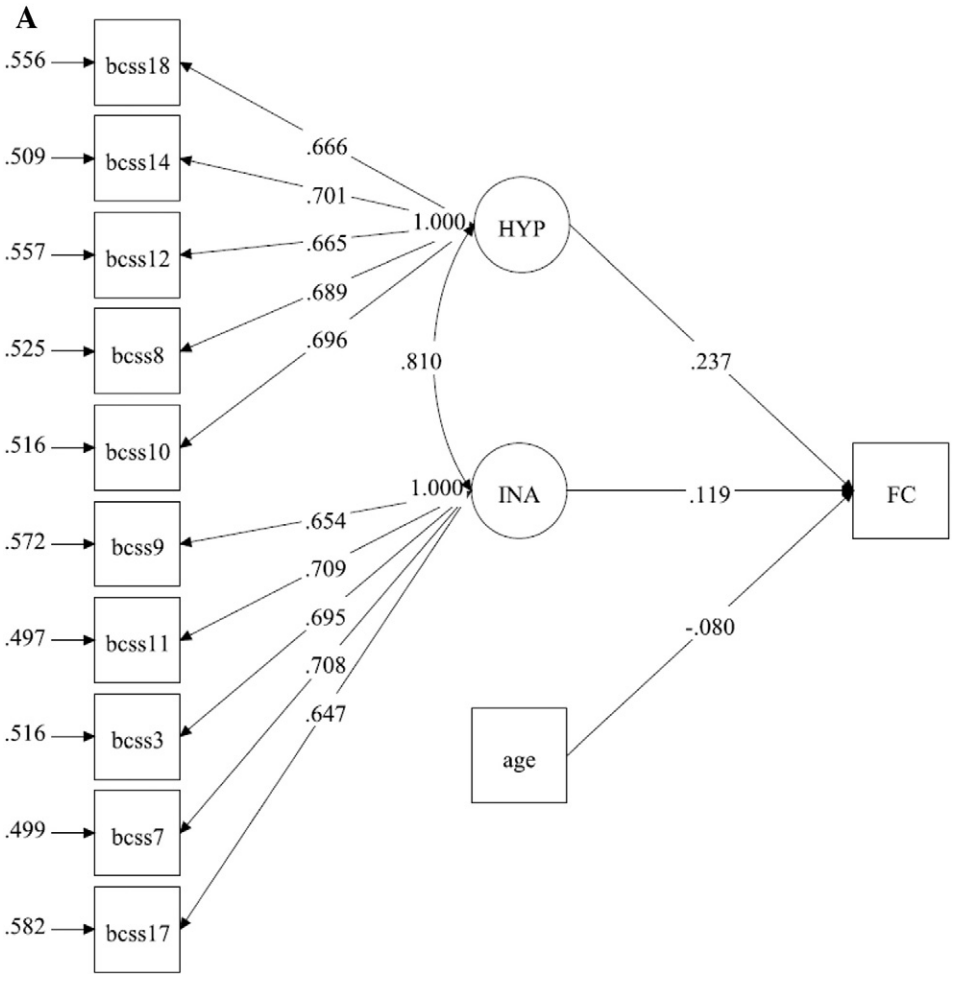

Fig. 1. a. Saturated ordinal logit regression model 5 (age: 14–16) b. Saturated ordinal logit regression model 5 (age: 17–19) c. Saturated ordinal logit regression model 5 (age: 20–24).

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