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(The null) Importance of police experience on intuitive credibility of people with intellectual disabilities



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ABSTRACT

In the present study, the intuitive ability of police to discriminate between real and false statements of people with mild and moderate (IQ range = 50–80, average = 60.0) intellectual disabilities (ID) was analyzed. The assessments issued by groups with different levels of experience in police techniques (psychology students, and police officers) were compared. The results showed no differences between the two groups in their ability to discriminate ($d' = 0.785$ and $d' = 0.644$, respectively). When the experience of the police was taken into consideration, no differences were found between “experienced” and “novice” police officers ($d' = 0.721$ and $d' = 0.582$, respectively). No differences were found in response criteria, which were neutral in all cases. Moreover, 34.73% of cases evaluated by the inexperienced group were incorrectly discriminated, in comparison to the 37.75% of incorrect assessments made by police. The implications of the limited ability of intuition to discriminate between real and simulated victims with ID, which did not yield significant differences between experienced and inexperienced assessors in obtaining and assessing statements, are discussed. In light of the results of this study, it is concluded that adequate resources and standardized procedures to properly address people with ID who come into contact with the police and judicial institutions need to be provided.

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1. Introduction

According to data from the Spanish Judicial Police, between 2008 and 2010, there were 10,045 allegations in Spain in which a person with intellectual disability (ID) was involved, either as victim, perpetrator or witness (González, Cendra, & Manzanero, 2013). The vulnerability of people with ID makes them a population at risk, increasing the likelihood of becoming crime victims themselves. The main causes of vulnerability are: ignorance of what constitutes an offence, difficulties in communication (Brownlie, Jabbar, Beitchman, Vida, & Atkinson, 2007; Oosterhoorn & Kendrick, 2001), greater dependency of relationships with caregivers, which makes claiming more difficult (Sobsey, 2002; Westcott & Jones, 1999), and their need for social approval.

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Probably, one of the main obstacles in crime investigation originates in the stereotypes that society holds on the testifying ability of people with intellectual disabilities. Existing stereotypes (Henry, Ridley, Perry, & Crane, 2011; Peled, Iarocci, & Connolly, 2004; Sobsey & Doe, 1991; Stobbs & Kebbell, 2003; Tharinger, Horton, & Millea, 1990; Valenti-Hein & Schwartz, 1993) about these people tend to make them less credible than other victims, which could lead to the rejection of proceedings in which the victim has an intellectual disability. Henry et al. (2011) evaluated the credibility of children with ID and of developmentally normal children and found that the former, because they gave fewer details, were less credible than the latter. Peled et al. (2004) explored the perceived credibility of young persons with ID who were required to give testimony in a legal setting. Half of the observers were told beforehand that the witness had moderate intellectual disability, and the other half were told that the witness was a person who was developmentally normal. When subsequently questioned about the credibility of the testimonies, they stated that those testimonies given by a person with ID were considered less credible.

On the other hand, it has been proposed that lying is cognitively more complex than telling the truth (Vrij, Fisher, Mann, & Leal, 2006). Therefore, lying would imply a greater demand of cognitive resources (Vrij & Heaven, 1999). In this sense, some of the existing stereotypes on the ability of people with intellectual disabilities have led to the belief that they are not capable of producing complex lies, therefore making them more credible (Bottoms, Nysse-Carris, Harris, & Tyda, 2003).

The two stereotypes are contradictory, but both are likely to influence the ability to distinguish truth and falsehood in people with intellectual disabilities. In a previous study (Manzanero, Alemany, Recio, Vallet, & Aróztegui, 2015), the differentiating characteristics of true and false accounts made by people with intellectual disabilities were analyzed using procedures based on Reality Monitoring (Manzanero & Diges, 1995; Sporer, 1997), and intuitive ability to discriminate between the two types of stories. The results showed that accounts differed according to their origin in the amount of detail, the incardination of the facts in a spatial and temporal context, and the reproduction of conversations. It was also noted that, from an intuitive point of view, people with little knowledge about developmental disorders and no experience in interacting with people with intellectual disabilities were able to discriminate the two types of statements above chance, but with a high probability of error (0.381).

In general, it could be argued that the ability to assess the credibility of a statement is relatively low and tends to be close to random. Most studies (Aamodt & Custer, 2006; Akehurst, Bull, Vrij, & Köhnken, 2004; Bond, 2007; Bond & DePaulo, 2006; Mann & Vrij, 2006; Mann, Vrij, & Bull, 2004; Manzanero & Diges, 1994) show success rates in discriminating between real and false accounts close to 50% with a tolerance of approximately $\pm 10\%$. The percentage of hits would be similar for different groups, depending on their experience (police, judges, students, etc.). The only difference usually found (Bond & DePaulo, 2006; Meissner & Kassin, 2002; Vrij, 2000) is that subjects without training in the analysis of credibility, in general, tend to believe the statements independently from their reality, whereas judges and police are more likely to exhibit mendacity, i.e. they tend to think that accounts are false. However, some previous studies (Ekman & O'Sullivan, 1991; Ekman, O'Sullivan, & Frank, 1999; Ericsson & Smith, 1991) had pointed out that experts in these tasks (such as forensic psychologists, lawyers or the police) would have greater ability to discriminate false testimony from other true statements than subjects with no experience. However, most studies refer to non-significant differences in the ability to detect deception when comparing expert and lay assessors (Bond & DePaulo, 2006; DePaulo & Pfeifer, 1986; Garrido, Masip, & Herrero, 2004; Goodman, Batterman-Faunce, Schaaf, & Kenney, 2002; Kraut & Poe, 1980).

Vrij (2004) suggests ten possible causes for the low accuracy in detecting deception: (a) no absolute indicators of lies; (b) subtle differences in lying vs. telling the truth; (c) heuristic decision making; (d) adherence to rules of conversation that hinder detection; (e) reliance on non-diagnostic evidence; (f) attention to channels is not very revealing; (g) dismissal of inter-individual differences in respondents (idiosyncratic error); (h) rejection of the influence of situational factors (intra-individual differences); (i) dismissal of the inter-individual differences of the detectors; and (j) inadequate use of interviewing and interrogation techniques. In addition, limited ability to discriminate may be because actual and false accounts are not sufficiently different (Bekerian & Dennett, 1992; Manzanero, 2006, 2009; Porter & Yuille, 1996; Sporer & Sharman, 2006; Vrij, 2005; Vrij, Akehurst, Soukara, & Bull, 2004), and differential features may appear depending on variables such as retention interval, preparation of narrative (Manzanero & Diges, 1995) or the degree of involvement in the event (Manzanero, El-Astal, & Aróztegui, 2009).

The aim of this study was to analyze the ability of two groups with different degrees of experience in obtaining and assessing statements (students vs. Judicial Police) to discriminate between actual and simulated victims with ID. According to the “mendacity” bias described above, agents would exhibit a greater tendency to disbelieve the statement provided. Furthermore, this study aims to investigate whether experience influences the assessment of the credibility of a witness. The hypothesis is that the greater the experience, the more accurate judgments about credibility will be.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Two groups of assessors with different experience in obtaining and assessing statements participated in the experiment. The inexperienced group was composed of 53 undergraduate Psychology students (16 men and 37 women) from Universidad Complutense and Universidad de Comillas (Madrid), who had no specific experience or knowledge on how to

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