Strategies of Preparation and Impression Management - How Innocence can Backfire

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Abstract

While numerous studies have been conducted regarding the objective indicators of deception, few have investigated the subjective strategies that are used. Knowing the strategies used by both innocent and guilty suspects as they attempt to convince investigators they are innocent is vital. In the current study, 90 students were witnesses, innocent suspects, or guilty suspects in a realistic mock theft. The strategies used to: 1) prepare for the interview, and 2) during the interview. Strategies of preparation and impression management will be presented and the paradox that made innocents appear deceptive and guilty.

Summary

While numerous studies have been conducted regarding the objective indicators of deception, few have investigated the subjective strategies that are used. Knowing what strategies are used by both innocent and guilty suspects as they attempt to convince investigators of their innocents is momentous. A natural yet flawed assumption amongst law enforcement is that innocent individuals will simply tell the whole truth. However, if one looks at actual cases, it becomes evident that even innocent suspects employ strategies to make themselves appear innocent and believable (Colwell, Memon, James-Kangal, Cole, Martin, Wirsing & Cooper, under review). Importantly, sometimes these strategies backfire, and make an innocent person appear guilty. 90 students from Southern Connecticut State University witnessed or participated in a theft. A research assistant (RA1) gave each participant a questionnaire to complete. RA1 took off their backpack and placed their wallet inside all while the participants were watching. A second research assistant (RA2) enters the room and talked with RA1 as RA1 was leaving the room. RA2 then proceeds to go through RA1’s backpack, take a pencil and hand it to the participant. RA2 then finds RA1’s wallet and depending on the script RA2 either stole the wallet or told the participant to steal the money. After the theft, RA2 made an excuse to leave the room and asked the participant to stall RA1 so they would have more time to escape. When RA1 returns they notice their bag has been moved and money is missing from their wallet. RA1 immediately blamed RA2 and tells the participant they are leaving to look for RA2. The participant then reports to a coordinator. If the participant stole the money they were instructed to blame the theft on RA2, however if they participant witnessed the theft they were instructed to respond honestly and completely. Each participant was then interviewed one week following the theft. A post-interview questionnaire was given to each participant. The questionnaire asked participants how they prepared for the interview through a series of open-ended questions. These questions were created to assess common themes that have emerged in the literature. Content analyses and post-event questionnaires were used to determine strategies of preparation prior to the interview and impression management during the interview. While most participants reported similar behaviors, witnesses performed differently than innocent or guilty suspects. Witnesses did not worry about maintaining eye contact or appearing calm and confident during the interview. Importantly, this lack of concern with impression management has been known to backfire, such that witnesses appear deceptive and guilty when compared to suspects. Interviewer ratings of apparent guilt and deceptiveness will be included, also.

**Tables**

Preparatory behaviors by group

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Witness | Innocent Suspect | Guilty Suspect | F | *p* | Eta squared will be here |
| Create Story | .25 (.45) | .13\*(.34) | .40 (.51) | 1.85 | .03 |  |
| Practice | .44 (.51) | .08\* (.29) | .27 (.46) | 3.51 | .04 |  |
| Tell Anyone | .38 (.50) | .35 (.49) | .07\* (.26) | 2.42 | .02 |  |
| Appear Innocent | 1.0 (<.01) | .96 (.21) | .93 (.26) | .48 | .76 |  |

\* Differs at .05 alpha

Strategies of Preparation prior to Interview

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Witness | Innocent Suspect | Guilty Suspect | F | *p* | Eta squared |
| Maximum information | .27  (.51) | .26  (.57) | .20  (.49) | .07 | .93 |  |
| Key details | .40  (.73) | .26  (.69) | .27  (.59) | .22 | .80 |  |
| Correct details | .07  (.31) | .21  (.14) | .13  (.16) | .62 | .54 |  |
| Rehearse | .13  (.35) | .39  (.72) | .33  (.72) | .76 | .47 |  |
| Writing down | .40  (.82) | .08  (.41) | .00  (.00) | 2.6 | .05 |  |
| Calm | .20  (.56) | .30  (.63) | .27  (.70) | .12 | .89 |  |
| Dress Appropriately | . 00  (.00) | .21  (.60) | . 13  (.52) | .92 | .40 |  |
| Not rehearse | . 53a  (.91) | . 13b  (.46) | . 40  (.74) | 1.8 | .09 |  |
| Just world | . 13  (.24) | . 21  (.38) | . 07  (.22) | .43 | .65 |  |

Apparent Guilt to Investigative Interviewer

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Innocent n=43 | Guilty  n=11 | T | *p* |
| Correct Details | 8  (.46) | 0  (0) | 2.49 | .02 |
| Writing Down | 8  (.63) | 0  (0) | 2.49 | .02 |

Apparent Honesty to Investigative Interviewer

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Honest | Deceptive | T | *P* |
| Correct Details | .21 n=43  (.47) | 0 (0) n=11 | 2.74 | .01 |
| Writing Down | .21 n=43  (.62) | 0 n=11  (0) | 2.10 | .04 |

Strategies of Impression Management during the Interview

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Strategy | | Witness | | Innocent Suspect | | Guilty Suspect | | Chi- Square | | *p* value | r | | |
| 1. Provide as much | |  | |  | |  | |  | |  |  | | |
| detail that can be | | 10 | | 14 | | 6 | |  | |  |  | | |
| remembered | | (.50) | | (.50) | | (.51) | | 2.05 | | .22 | -.17 | | |
| 2. Tell the truth when | | 6 | | 16 | | 4 | |  | |  |  | | |
| Possible | | (.50) | | (.47) | | (.46) | | 7.73 | | .61 | -.07 | | |
| 3. Provide small details | | 2 | | 1 | | 1 | |  | |  |  | | |
|  | | (.34) | | (.21) | | (.26) | | .93 | | .53 | -.09 | | |
| 4. Calm and Confident | | 3 | | 9 | | 8 | |  | |  |  | | |
| (Speech) | | (.40) | | (.50) | | (.52) | | 4.04 | | .05 | .27 | | |
| 5. Did not hesitate | | 0 | | 1 | | 1 | |  | |  |  | | |
|  | | (.00) | | (.21) | | (.26) | | 1.01 | | .33 | .13 | | |
| 6. Eye Contact | | 4 | | 9 | | 9 | |  | |  |  | | |
|  | | (.45) | | (.50) | | (.51) | | 3.97 | | .05 | .27 | | |
| 7. Plausible | | 3 | | 3 | | 4 | |  | |  |  | | |
|  | | (.40) | | (.34) | | (.46) | | 1.12 | | .60 | .07 | | |
| 8. Control of Information | | 7 | | 9 | | 9 | |  | |  |  | | |
|  | | (.51) | | (.50) | | (.51) | | 1.65 | | .39 | .12 | | |
| 9. Act Natural | | 5 | | 7 | | 3 | |  | |  |  | | |
|  | | (.48) | | (.47) | | (.41) | | .63 | | .50 | -.09 | | |
| 10. Control physical | | 7 | | 9 | | 7 | |  | |  |  | | |
| Behavior | | (.51) | | (.50) | | (.52) | | .22 | | .88 | .02 | | |
| 11. Deny suspicious | | 4 | | 1 | | 5 | |  | |  |  | | |
| Behavior | | (.45) | | (.21) | | (.49) | | 5.69 | | .61 | .07 | | |
| 12. Just world and | | 3 | | 4 | | 1 | |  | |  |  | | |
| Innocence | | (.40) | | (.39) | | (.26) | | 1.11 | | .36 | -.13 | | |
| 13. Reinstatement | | 1 | | 2 | | 1 | |  | |  |  | | |
| of context | | (.25) | | (.29) | | (.26) | | .10 | | .96 | .01 | | |
| 14. Provide emotional | | 1 | | 2 | | 0 | |  | |  |  | | |
| Reaction | | (.25) | | (.29) | | (.00) | | 1.33 | | .47 | -.10 | | |
| 15. Control of | | 0 | | 2 | | 2 | |  | |  | | |  |
| Personality | | (.00) | | (.29) | | (.35) | | 2.10 | | .16 | | | .19 |

Apparent Guilt to Investigative Interviewer

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Innocent | Guilty | t | *p* |
| Small Details | .11  (.32) | 0  (0) | 2.1 | .04 |
| Control of Personality | .08  (.27) | 0  0 | 2.0 | .05 |

Apparent Honesty to Investigative Interviewer

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Honest | Deceptive | t | *p* |
| Correct Details | .11.  (.51) | 0  (0) | 2.10 | .04 |
| Writing Down | .08  (.27) | 0  (0) | 2.02 | .05 |

**Discussion**

1. How honest and deceptive respondents prepare for, and act during, and investigative interview will be described.

2. The paradox of being relaxed and appearing deceptive and guilty will be discussed.

3. Reasons for this paradox will be presented

4. Implications for investigator training and credibility assessment