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**The self-presentation of guilty and innocent suspects in a pre-interrogation phase**

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## **Guilty and innocent suspects self-presentation in a pre-interrogation phase**

**Abstract.** This study was made with the purpose to examine the field of self-presentation and self-regulation in counter-interrogation strategies. Of interest was the difference in how guilty and innocent suspects present themselves in a pre-interrogation phase in comparison to one another and in comparison to a control group. A study was conducted online with 151 respondents, all English speaking from 12 different countries. The innocent and guilty group watched a film sequence where they either committed a crime or did not. They were then asked to rate themselves on six different questions in a pre-interrogation phase, three on law-abidance and three on honesty. The control group did not see any film sequence, they only answered the same set of questions as the other two groups. An overall better than average effect was present, meaning that all three groups graded themselves as more honest and more law-abiding than the average person. In summary the result showed that innocent suspects graded themselves higher on both law-abidance and honesty than the other two groups. The significant result of the study showed that the innocent persons rated themselves as more honest than the control group. This is not in line with previous research.

There has been an interest for a long time on how to detect a liar (DePaulo, 1992). This is of interest in various situations and fields, for example during job interviews with people who in a future position might handle classified information, like the military. The interviewer needs to determine if the person being interviewed is telling the truth or not. Another example is during interrogations conducted by the police (Strömwall, 2021). In this study the latter one is where the focus will be held, but, this study will shed light on and hopefully give valuable information that can be used in a range of different areas, not just in interrogation situations.

The one area in the research on truth-tellers and liars that has had the most focus over the years has been that of non-verbal cues. There are also a lot of misconceptions about how to spot a liar. These misconceptions seem to live a life of their own and people have written books on the matter and hold seminars on how to spot a liar. In sum though, research has shown there are only a few non-verbal clues that are helpful in being able to see if someone is telling the truth or if they are lying. But, even so, the research tells us this is hard because a lot of research is not mirroring real interrogation situations and the findings also depend on a lot of different factors. For example, a truth-teller can be as nervous as a liar in the same situation and studies have shown that both lying and truth-telling suspects use non-verbal strategies of trying to keep eye contact and not making sudden or nervous movements (Granhag et al., 2015; Strömwall, Hartwig & Granhag, 2006; Vrij, Hartwig & Granhag, 2019; Vrij, Granhag & Mann, 2010).

In later years the research have come to focus more on the verbal cues to detect a liar or a truth-teller. One of the areas in this perspective is counter-interrogations strategies. This research has put a greater focus on the underlying psychological processes of how most liars, but also truth-tellers, reason and how they set up different strategies. This research has led to a broader understanding of how suspects use different strategies during an interrogation. The research has shown that even truth-telling suspects adopt different strategies during an interrogation. In the light of this research the development of an interrogation method called the Strategic Use of Evidence technique, in short SUE, have been made (Granhag & Luke, 2018; Granhag et al., 2015; Strömwall et al., 2006).

The Strategic use of evidence, SUE, refers to a technic developed with purpose to guide the interrogator towards the best use of the already known information. The technic involves different tactics, for example on how the interrogator should start asking questions to be able to predict the truthfulness of the suspect's story (Granhag & Hartwig, 2015). Research has shown that an interrogation is a dynamic situation involving the interrogator and the suspect. The guilty suspects adopt their strategies depending on a range of different factors. An example of this is that guilty suspects tend to reveal more information if they think that the interrogator has a lot of information. The more interrogation experience a suspect has, guilty or innocent, the less she will talk. In contrary to this, the more inexperienced suspect will reveal more information if there is a higher degree of suspicion against them. Over several interrogations the guilty suspects also tend to stick to their story whereas the innocent suspects tend to differ a bit since they are telling a story from their memory which is being reconstructed over time. Generally speaking guilty suspects also seem to have a more withholding strategy compared to the truth-telling innocent suspects (Granhag et al., 2015; Granhag, Clemens & Strömwall, 2009).

The psychology behind counter-interrogation strategies applied by suspects is not clear to this day. There are a couple of theories that shed light on this topic but previous research on the matter have pointed to the need for further research that can make a more comprehensive theory for counter-interrogation strategies applied by suspects in the criminal justice field (Vrij, et al., 2019).

The theories that often come up in the research field is from both cognitive and social psychology (Vrij, et al., 2019). For the present study the most relevant theories are the strategic models in the cognitive perspective, the self-presentation theory and the self-regulation theory in the social psychological perspective. There are a couple of other psychological concepts that seem to be relevant for counter-interrogation strategies that need to be mentioned. They will here be accounted for in short before giving a more thorough account of the aforementioned theories.

The first of these concepts is the perspective in social psychology that people tend to believe that the world is a fair and just place. This is called "the belief in a just world". This influences the truth-tellers in interrogation situations to think that they will be believed because they simply deserve to. In other words, if you tell the truth, people will believe you. Another concept is the illusion of transparency, this concept explains that people often overestimate to which degree others can perceive our inner state and emotions. The illusion of transparency describes that, for example, innocent people in interrogations will think that the interrogator can "see" that they are telling the truth. In previous studies it has been found that one of the main strategies of innocent suspects is to simply "tell it as it is", a reason for this may be the illusion of transparency (Vrij, et al., 2019; Granhag & Luke, 2018; Granhag et al., 2015; Hartwig, Granhag & Strömwall, 2007).

Self-presentation theory describes the need for people to regulate one's own behavior to create a desirable impression on others. This takes place in a lot of different social situations where people will adopt their behavior, verbal and non-verbal, to reach a desired effect and/or goal on how they want others to perceive them. This involves taking on strategies so the person will be able to reach this goal and get the desired effect. In the study of counter-interrogation strategies the theory is of relevance since both guilty and innocent suspects have the common goal to be believed by the interrogator. The innocent suspects wants to prove to the interrogator that they are not hiding any information. The guilty suspects wants to convince the interrogator that they do not have any more information than they are telling. This sets the stage for counter-interrogation strategies for both innocent and guilty suspects (DePaulo, 1992; Granhag & Luke, 2018).

To create credibility is an act of self-control. So, to get an understanding on how self-presentation is conducted, the theory of self-regulation offers an explanation. The self-regulation theory suggests that people change their strategies depending on how effective they are for reaching the desired goal or goals (Carver & Scheier, 2012). Zimmerman and Cleary (2009) describe self-regulation as a model with a forethought phase, a performance phase and a self-reflection phase.

In the forethought phase goals are set and strategic planning is made. In this phase there is also self-motivational beliefs of the persons own self-efficiency, what to expect from the outcome, the value of the task and goal orientation. The performance phase is about self-control with task-strategies, time management, self-instructions, environmental structuring and possibly help-seeking. The last phase of self-reflection is marked by self-judgment and self-evaluation where the person judges herself based on her self-set standards. This phase also includes casual attribution where the person explains her failures and/or her success by attributing them. This is where the strategies of self-regulation become clear. This phase also includes self-reaction with self-satisfaction and defensive and/or adaptive behavior. Here the person makes conclusions about the strategies used and if she needs to alter them in the future or not. The higher the level of satisfaction the more likely it is that the strategies used the next time will be more adaptive and therefore effective. The higher the level of dissatisfaction the more defensive the person becomes and apply new strategies to be able to avoid discomfort in the future. This can be procrastination, apathy or feelings of helplessness (Zimmerman & Cleary, 2009; Granhag et al., 2009).

Hartwig et al. (2007) found that guilty and innocent suspects tended to use the same strategies of acting relaxed and calm before the actual interrogation and that they then both firmly denied the accusations. The guilty suspects started to differ from the innocent truth-tellers during the interrogation. This could be one example of the control in the self-regulation theory on how both groups of suspects want to present themselves in line with self-presentation theory. But, as suggested by Hartwig et al. (2010) the behavior of the innocent suspects could also be altered because the situation calls for a credible impression whereas the behavior of the guilty suspects could be that of a more deceptive ground than that of the innocent suspects.

## **Findings from research on counter-interrogation strategies**

Both innocent and guilty suspects apply counter-interrogation strategies. The main differences is that the innocent suspects are telling the truth and have grounds for their claims, whereas the guilty have not, this is called the deception discrepancy (DePaulo, 1992). Hartwig et al. (2010) found that both innocent and guilty suspects planned their non-verbal behavior to the same degree and that the difference was that the guilty suspects planned their verbal content to a higher degree then the innocent suspects.

Innocent suspects have shown a tendency to mostly use a “tell it like it is” strategy. They trust that their innocent will show and that they will be believed simply because they are telling the truth (Vrij, et al., 2019).

The guilty suspects have a more cognitive demanding task at hand, according to some research (Vrij et al., 2019). They need to figure out what information they should share and what information they should hide. A well-documented psychological phenomenon is that of how humans react when there is a threat present, like in an interrogation situation. Humans hide, avoid the situation or escape it. The tendency for the guilty suspect to mainly use the strategies of denial or of hiding information is logical, as for them it is a threatening situation. In conclusion, research that has been conducted seem to have had a greater focus on how

guilty suspects react and how liars behave then that of how innocent suspects and people who tell the truth react and what strategies they use (Granhag & Luke, 2018; Granhag et al., 2009; Vrij, et al., 2019).

When considering the self-presentation and self-regulation theory it is of interest to understand how people tend to answer questions about themselves in a non-critical situation. There is a theory of better than average effect present in a range of areas (Williams & Gilovich, 2008; Hargis, Whatley & Castel, 2020). This effect is the tendency for people to score their different qualities higher than the average person in comparison. For example, if a set of people are given a question about how they would rate themselves as car drivers on a scale of one to ten, five being average, most people would rate themselves over five. In other words, most of them would rate themselves as better than the average car driver. Qualities that research has shown a better than average effect on is for example social desirable traits such as honesty (Hargis et al., 2020). This effect differs from self-presentation in that aspect that people actually think that they are better than average (Williams & Gilovich, 2008).

## **Present study**

The design of the study was inspired by the theory of self-presentation (DePaulo, 1992; Granhag & Luke, 2018), the theory of self-regulation (Carver & Scheier, 2012; Zimmerman & Cleary, 2009) and the better than average effect (Hargis et al., 2020; Williams & Gilovich, 2008).

What seems to be a gap of information in the research field of counter-interrogation strategies is when the suspects start applying the strategies. There is also a gap in information on how guilty and innocent suspects differ in the use of strategies compared to a control group. Research concludes that strategies are being used, but do the suspects start using these strategies in a pre-interrogation phase? Previous research has also concluded that there is a better than average effect on a range of topics, specifically social desirable traits. Considering the self-presentation theory, the self-regulation theory and the better than average effect, would there be a difference between how guilty suspects, innocent suspects and a control group would answer questions on their honesty and law-abidance in a pre-interrogation phase? This question leads to the two hypothesis of this study:

**Hypothesis 1.** The guilty suspects will, in line with previous research on the use of counter-interrogation strategies, also use a strategy in the pre-interrogation phase. This strategy will be presenting themselves as more honest and law-abiding than the control group and innocent group.

**Hypothesis 2.** The innocent suspects will, in line with previous research on counter-interrogation strategies, simply think that they just have to tell it like it is and therefore score the same as the control group.

To answer the hypotheses of this study three groups will be used, one innocent group, one guilty group and one control group. The innocent and guilty group will watch a film sequence where they either commit a (mock-) crime or do not. They will then get to rate themselves on six different questions in a pre-interrogation phase, three on law-abidance and three on honesty. The author will have made these questions for this study specifically.

The questions on honesty are of the purpose of making the respondents think of themselves in previous situations. The law-abiding questions are of the purpose to make the respondents think of the situation they are in after watching the film sequences. Honesty is chosen as it is a social desirable trait relevant in an interrogation situation. The purpose for the interrogator is to see if the suspect is honest or not, and, it is in the interest of the suspect to present herself as honest so the interrogator will believe her truth or lies depending on her

motives. Law-abidance is chosen as it is of relevance on how someone would present herself regarding law-abidance in a questioning/interrogation situation. All six questions are going to be asked straightforward, since the purpose is to see how the respondents present themselves. The control group will not see any film sequence, they will only answer the same set of questions as the other two groups.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

The sample size was set to 50 respondents per group (i.e., guilty vs. innocent vs. control), a total of 150 respondents. The sample size choice was based on the available resources at hand and the respondents were compensated with 1GBP each for their participation.

The participants were recruited via the crowd-sourcing platform Prolific Academic. The Qualtrics survey engine was used to construct the study. There were a total of 152 participants in this study. In the process of cleaning the data it became clear that one respondent answered the questions two times. The latter answer from this person was thereby excluded. Qualtrics randomized the respondents into three groups. In the control group there were 54 respondents (35,5%), in the guilty group there were 48 respondents (31,6%) and in the innocent group there were 49 respondents (32,2%). The mean age of the respondents was 35 years where the youngest was 18 years old and the oldest was 78 years old. The respondents that took part in the study were all English speaking. They answered the questions from 12 different countries; Great Britain, USA, South Africa, Canada, Ireland, Poland, Czech Republic, Israel, New Zealand, Monaco, Australia and Hungary. The gender of the respondents was 62,5% women, 34,9 % men and 2,6% non-binary.

### **Procedure**

The participants for this study were invited via Prolific Academic. When they opened the study, they got the information that this was a two-part study that was going to take place when they opened it and then 6-10 days later on a time that was convenient for them. The only information they received about the purpose of the study at this time was that it was to examine interview strategies. The control group just got the information that it was a study in the field of psychology.

Both the control group and the suspects (i.e., innocent and guilty) were informed that their participation were voluntary, that the use of the data would apply to the current study, that their confidentiality were going to be protected and that they could withdraw from the study at any time. After this first information the control group were directed straight to the questionnaire and then to the debriefing, described further down.

The suspects got the information that they were first going to read a background story of a situation, then see a short film sequence related to that background story. They were instructed to read the background story and look at the film sequence as if they were the ones committing the actions described.

The suspects then went to read the background story of a situation. This was either one of a non-criminal act that took place at a university where they went in to retrieve mail

for a friend out of office or a criminal act. The criminal act was that they worked with a fuel company, were going to a university to steal documents and then place a bomb at the university to cover up their tracks.

When the suspects had read the background story they went on to see the film sequence that was shown only once. After this they were informed that two days had gone by since they were at the university and that they received a letter from the police. The letter said that they were called in for questioning to the police station after they were seen entering the university and staying for about ten minutes at the day of which a bomb were placed there.

The respondents got the information that they had been caught on the university's surveillance camera. This information was given to hinder the guilty suspects from taking on a strategy of denying ever been to the university. They were also informed that all the people that were at the university at this time had been called in for questioning. They also got a named inspector assigned to their case for the situation to feel more authentic. This inspector had a gender-neutral name to eliminate any possible bias due to gender-norm expectations.

After the respondents saw the letter they got to see a short text with thoughts on the letter. The innocent suspects read that they were in fact innocent and the guilty suspects read that they are called in for questioning but not as a main suspect, which is good for them. Both of the groups were informed that they should try to make the inspector believe that they were innocent. The questioning was said in the letter to take place in 6-10 days and that the assigned inspector wanted them to complete a short questionnaire as a routine before this meeting. Six questions, on law-abidance and honesty, were then presented randomly.

After the innocent and guilty suspects had answered the questionnaire they came to a debriefing. Here, the full purpose of the study was revealed in that its aim was to examine counter-interrogation strategies in a pre-interrogation phase. They were informed that there would not be a questioning, and that they would receive the compensation of 1GBP. They were also informed that the full purpose of the study was the questions and that the withholding of information was do to eliminate bias in their answers.

Since the study took place online a control question was included. The question was to type "2ed" in a box below the question. This question was set there to see if the participants were paying attention to the study or not. If the answer to this question was wrong it meant that a closer look at that persons answers was called for. Though all of the participants answered this question right, which meant no consideration had to be made in the matter.

## **Material**

This study was conducted with a questionnaire consisting of six questions. For the exact questions asked see Appendix A. Three of the questions related to honesty and three questions to law-abidance. The honesty questions were chosen to make the respondents think back in time and the law-abiding questions was chosen for the situation so that the respondents would think of the current situation. The participants were asked to grade themselves on a 10-point continuous scale. In text the lowest score, 1, was "the worst" and the highest score, 10, was "the best". The Qualtrics randomized the order of the questions. This was made to eliminate order effects. The questions were asked in three different ways. One was "How would your friends rate...", one "How would you rate...?" and one in the way "Compared to others how would you rate...?". This was made in regards to the better than average effect and how one would want to present themselves with regards to self-presentation theory (DePaulo, 1992; Granhag & Luke, 2018; Hargis et al., 2020; Williams & Gilovich, 2008; Howitt & Cramer, 2011). The participants were randomly assigned to which group they were going to be part in.

## Data analysis

The data was collected to Qualtrics and then downloaded to SPSS for further analysis. The data analysis of choice for this study was Multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) as described in Howitt and Cramer (2011, 2014). This method was chosen because the study included six different dependent variables (i.e., six questions).

## Research ethics

In this study the four main research ethic principals was considered, the information requirement, the consent requirement, the confidentiality requirement and the use requirement as described by the Swedish Research Council (Vetenskapsrådet, 2002; Vetenskapsrådet 2017).

The respondents were informed that their participation was freely and that they could end their participation at any time during the study. They were also informed that their answers could not be distinguished from those of others and that no data that could be traced to a particular person would be either gathered or saved. They were informed that the answers were going to be examined on a group level. Regarding to the purpose of this study we could not inform the respondents of the full purpose in forehand since we wanted to examine their counter-interrogation strategies before they thought that they were going to be questioned. After careful considerations the respondents were informed that they were going to take part in a study of interrogations strategies. They were also informed that they were going to be questioned after some standard questions, but they were not since these questions were the purpose of this study. The control group was told that it was a study in the field of psychology and that they were going to answer six questions. This decision was made to reduce any bias when answering the questions on law-abidance and honesty. The respondents were given the e-mail to the researcher in case of any unpleasant feeling do to this discrepancy in information.

After the participants answered the questions they were thoroughly debriefed. Here the full purpose of the study was revealed and why the withholding of it in the beginning. They were also informed that they would receive the payment of 1GBP as said.

## Results

A bivariate correlation analysis was made to see if the six questions used in the study had a positive correlation or not. The result showed that all of the six questions had a significant positive correlation with each other between  $r = .437$  to  $r = .817$  ( $p < .001$ ).

For the analysis a Multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) with multiple dependent variables was used, the six questions being the dependent variables. The result of the MANOVA, using Wilks Lambda, showed a significant effect of the independent variable (assigned group) on the dependent variables ( $F[12, 286]=1.97$ ,  $p 0.027$ ; Wilk's  $\Lambda = 0.853$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .76$ ). The result also showed an overall better than average effect with a mean for all six questions (dependent variables) between 7,35 to 9,04 with a possible range of 1 to 10. No significant results were found other than for one question, the question on how the respondents answered on how they graded their own honesty. This result showed that the innocent suspects graded themselves significantly higher than did the control group, see Table 1 as it reports post-hoc comparisons. This meaning that the second hypothesis was not



supported. The innocent group in this study did not answer the questions in the same way as the control group. Though the only significant result was on self-scored honesty, the innocent group did also score higher than the other two groups on all six questions, see Table 2 for mean values of dependent variables.

The result did not support the first hypothesis of this study, for which the prediction was that the guilty group would rate themselves higher on honesty and law-abidance than the other two groups. In contrast, the innocent group scored higher. The results showed no significant difference in the answers between the guilty group and the innocent and control group with a significant range between  $p = 1.00$  and  $p = 0.87$ . The only significant result showed in contrast to the hypothesis that the innocent group rated themselves higher than the control group on one of the honesty questions, as is shown in Table 2.

## **Exploratory Analysis**

Profile plots were made as part of the MANOVA to get a visual of the different means of the three groups. Histograms were made for each groups answers to each question to get a clearer picture of the distribution and a bar chart for which the answers for all three groups were seen for each question. The profile plots and histograms were not included in this report since the difference in mean is visible in Table 3. This showed that the group that had answered at the high end of the scale (range 1 to 10) for the questions on honesty and law-abidance were all part of the innocent group. A regression analysis was also conducted to see if there were any differences by gender in how the respondents answered. No significant differences were found.

**Table 1.**

*Analysis of Variance Showing the  
Significant Result of the Study*

Dependent variable	(I) Group	(J) Group	Mean difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.b	Sig.b 95% confidence interval for difference	
						Lower bound	Upper bound
Grading your honesty	Control	Guilty	-.544	.303	.225	-1.279	.191
		Innocent	-1.189*	.302	<.001	-1.920	-.458
	Guilty	Control	.544	.303	.225	-.191	1.279
		Innocent	-.645	.311	.119	-1.379	.107
	Innocent	Control	1.189*	.302	<.001	.458	1.920
		Guilty	.645	.311	.119	-.107	1.379

*Notes.* \* The mean difference is significant at the .05 level.

b Adjustment for multiple comparisons: Bonferroni.

**Table 2.***Mean Values of Dependent Variables*

Dependent variable	Group	Mean	Std. deviation	Std. Error	Sig.b 95% confidence interval for difference	
					Lower bound	Upper bound
Law-abidance, BTA	Control	7.685	1.810	.274	7.143	8.227
	Guilty	7.833	2.382	.291	7.259	8.408
	Innocent	8.102	1.829	.288	7.533	8.671
Law-abidance, friends	Control	8.574	1.655	.254	8.073	9.075
	Guilty	8.417	2.201	.269	7.885	8.948
	Innocent	8.633	1.716	.266	8.106	9.159
Law-abidance, yourself	Control	8.463	1.342	.220	8.029	8.897
	Guilty	8.375	2.150	.233	7.915	8.835
	Innocent	8.939	1.232	.231	8.483	9.394
Honesty, yourself	Control	7.852	1.607	.208	7.441	8.263
	Guilty	8.396	1.783	.221	7.960	8.832
	Innocent	9.041	1.117	.218	8.609	9.473
Honesty, friends	Control	8.000	1.716	.227	7.552	8.448
	Guilty	8.333	1.883	.240	7.858	8.808
	Innocent	8.714	1.354	.238	8.244	9.185
Honesty, BTA	Control	7.352	1.728	.247	6.863	7.841
	Guilty	7.833	1.917	.262	7.315	8.352
	Innocent	8.143	1.814	.260	7.630	8.656

*Notes.* Friends refers to the questions asked in the way “How would your friends rate...”, yourself to the questions asked “How would you rate...?” and BTA to the questions asked in the way of “Compared to others how would you rate...?”.

## **Discussion**

Both hypotheses of this study were not supported by the result. In the results a clear better than average effect was shown. A total mean over the six questions between all three groups show 8,26 out of 10. The research design and its questions were used for the first time. The study was also inspired by a continuing and not yet published study of Lina Nyström at the University of Gothenburg, Department of forensic psychology, from which the film sequences used in this study came. The same film sequence is used in her study as in this (personal communication, 28 October 2021).

### **Previous research in comparison to the guilty group**

Hypothesis one was: The guilty suspects will, in line with previous research on the use of counter-interrogation strategies, also use a strategy in the pre-interrogation phase. This strategy will be presenting themselves as more honest and law-abiding than the control group and innocent group. The results of this study showed no support for this hypothesis.

According to self-presentation theory one would want to present themselves in a good way. If also considering the self-regulation theory one would do so in situations that would benefit the individuals desired goal and be adjusted to the situation. The goal in this study being to convince the inspector that you are innocent. Previous research has shown that the guilty suspect can apply a strategy to withhold information and thinking about what to share and not. One explanation to the lack of significant differences between the guilty and the control group could be do to the fact that we do not know if and in that case, which strategy the guilty group used. One strategy, like hypothesis one predicted could be for the guilty group to present themselves in a good matter as law-abiding and honest. On the other hand, one strategy could also be to not stand out from the average (DePaulo, 1992; Granhag & Luke, 2018; Zimmerman & Cleary, 2009; Granhag et al., 2009).

Previous research (Granhag & Luke, 2018; Granhag et al., 2009; Vrij, et al., 2019) has been made on guilty suspects in an actual interrogation-situation, in this study they though that this was not taking place for the next 6-10 days. The question here is how this affected the answers of the guilty suspects, or, if it had any effect. Could it be that guilty suspects do not have a strategy of presenting themselves in a good matter before an actual interrogation? Or, could it be that guilty suspects choose a strategy of not appearing too law-abiding and honest before an interrogation?

### **Previous research in comparison to the innocent group**

Hypothesis two was: The innocent suspects will, in line with previous research on counter-interrogation strategies, simply think that they just have to tell it like it is and therefore score the same as the control group. The results of this study show no support for this hypothesis. The results show the opposite for one question asked to the respondents.

The innocent suspects did not act in line with previous research. In previous research the innocent suspects have been treated like if they where the same as any other innocent person in the population (DePaulo, 1992; Vrij, et al., 2019). The question to ask here is how much stress an innocent person experience that is under investigation and/or is called in for questioning. An interrogation is a stressful situation and might therefore activate the persons self-regulation. The finding in this study suggests that there is a difference between a control

group and a group of innocent suspects (Zimmerman & Cleary, 2009; Granhag et al., 2009).

The statistically significant finding in this study was that the innocent group rated themselves higher on one of the questions compared to the control group. The innocent group presented themselves as more honest. The next question in hand is why the innocent group did this. One explanation could be that it is a strategy. Previous research has shown that innocent people can have a strategy as well as a guilty person. The difference lies in that the innocent people tend to go with a “tell it like it is” strategy and “my innocence will shine thru”, not a strategic plan of appearing very honest. There is though less research on innocent suspects counter-interrogation strategies than that of guilty ones (Carver & Scheier, 2012; Granhag & Luke, 2018; Granhag et al., 2009; Vrij, et al., 2019).

There is yet a question to be asked, did the time from the questions to the anticipated questioning affect the answers? Previous research has focused on the actual interrogation situation, not in forehand. Further research should look at if innocent suspects have a strategy to a higher degree if they are called for questioning or interrogation at a certain time after the actual situation happened. A possible explanation for the higher ratings on self-reported honesty compared to the control group could be due to the time. Previous studies have to the authors best of knowledge not been made when comparing an innocent and a control group in a pre-interrogation phase. This could be why it does not go in line with previous research; it has not been looked at before from this perspective and timeline (Granhag & Luke, 2018; Granhag et al., 2009; Vrij, et al., 2019).

An interesting result here is that even though the only significance was found in self-scored honesty, the innocent group did score higher than the other two groups on all questions. The lowest scoring group was the control group on all honesty questions. In the law-abiding questions the control-group scored lowest on the better than average question and the guilty-group scored the lowest on the other two law-abiding questions. The results were not significant, but it can tell us that a closer look may be needed regarding how we treat the innocent. To take into consideration that the pressure that comes with being a suspect, in an interrogation or maybe to be questioned in a job-interview may differ from someone who is just drawn from the population.

## **Limitations**

I want to acknowledge five different limitations of this study. The first is the number of respondents. In this study it was a clear better than average effect that had the impact of the data to make the difference in the answers smaller and this may be one explanation to why there were not more significant results.

The second limitation is the measurement. The questions that the respondents answered were used for the first time. Since the questions had not been used before one could ask if they are of good validity and reliability. More, different or more similar questions could have been included. The questions could also have been measured in forehand for good validity.

The third limitation of the study was that the respondents in the innocent and guilty group saw film sequences. Was this a scenario that made them feel as if they did commit the actions in the film sequence? Or, should the study have taken the participants to the university and had them commit the actions first-hand?

The fourth limitation of the study was that the respondents showed a heterogeneity regarding the collected personal information but were not asked if they had previously been in any interrogating situation. This could be a factor that might be of interest to control for

since previous experience can change the behavior (Howitt & Cramer, 2011; Williams & Gilovich, 2008; Hargis et al., 2020).

The fifth and last limitation to acknowledge is that the study was made for the first time. No study to the author's knowledge has been made to look at pre-interrogation screenings in this way. The study will contribute to the field of psychology in a better way if it is made on more than one occasion.

## **Conclusions**

The study showed a clear better than average effect present for all three groups, the guilty, the innocent and the control group. This is in line with previous research that has shown that people tend to rate themselves higher than average on social desirable traits (Hargis et al., 2020; Williams & Gilovich, 2008). The study at hand can be of interest in this field of study since the effect was present in a pre-interrogation phase. Future research regarding the better than average effect should look closer on its effect in different situations. In what situations do people tend to overestimate their social desirable traits?

To better understand the innocent suspects behavior future studies in the field of counter-interrogation strategies should consider including a control group. The study has shown that there was a significant difference between how the innocent suspects presented themselves compared to the control group. This finding may shed some light on the notion that innocent suspects can not be treated as any other person drawn from the population. The pressure of the situation can affect a person's behavior, which is in line with self-regulation theory. Further studies should also look in to the time-effect. Most studies that have been conducted in the field of counter-interrogation have had the interrogation close in time from when the "crime" took place. This study got answers from people in a pre-interrogation phase who thought they were going to be questioned by an inspector within 6-10 days, which may have had an affect on the answers. It would be of interest to compare answers between groups that have different time to a questioning.

People do not just present themselves in a good manner in crime-related situations but also in other situations where they want to reach a desired goal (Zimmerman & Cleary, 2009; Granhag et al., 2009). For example can a job-interview be a situation where questions about ones personality traits are asked about as part of the recruiting process. In this kind of situations it is also important, as well as in interrogation situations, to know how to interpret the answers from the one applying for a job. Further research on the area can determine if people who do not have anything to hide but have a high motivation for the job scores higher on social desirable traits than someone with lower motivation or someone who has something to hide.

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## Appendix A

### Law-abidance, better than average effect

How would you rate your level of law-abidance compared to others?

Much worse  
than others

Much better  
than others

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
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### Law-abidance, friends

How would your friends rate your level of law-abidance?

As a not at all  
law-abiding person

As a very  
law-abiding person

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
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### Law-abidance, yourself

How would you rate yourself as a law-abiding person?

As a not at all  
law-abiding person

As a very  
law-abiding person

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
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### Honesty, better than average effect

How would you rate your level of honesty compared to others?

Much worse  
than others

Much better  
than others

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
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### **Honesty, friends**

How would your friends rate your level of honesty?

As a not at all  
honest person

As a very  
honest person

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
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### **Honesty, yourself**

How honest of a person would you say that you are?

Not at all an  
honest person

A very  
honest person

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
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