To the best of my knowledge, Officer: Investigation of Crime Questionnaire Patterns Associated with Guilty Knowledge Concealment

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ABSTRACT

Determining the credibility of information obtained from suspects during police interviews is an essential aspect of crime-solving. This study examined the cognitive strategies used by subjects who attempt to conceal their knowledge of a crime, and whether deception in this context is detectable. Undergraduate participants were randomly assigned to one of three groups: (1) perpetrators who committed a mock theft; (2) scene witnesses who had knowledge of crime scene characteristics but not the crime; or (3) naïve responders who had no knowledge of details concerning the crime scene or of the crime itself. All participants then completed a Guilty Knowledge Questionnaire (GKQ), created for this study. Students acting as deceptive perpetrators were instructed to respond to questionnaire items in any manner that they felt would help them evade detection, while the others were instructed to respond honestly. As expected, deceptive perpetrators responded less accurately on the total GKQ than honest perpetrators and scene witnesses, but did not differ significantly from naïve responders. When crime scene and theft-knowledge questions were considered separately, however, deceptive perpetrators (unlike naïve responders) selectively acknowledged some awareness of scene details while minimizing knowledge of the crime itself.

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Accuracy and Honesty: Investigation of Crime Questionnaire Patterns Associated with Guilty Knowledge Concealment

The statements elicited from suspects during police interviews are essential pieces of evidence in solving crimes. Investigators must decide whether and when a particular suspect is lying or telling the truth, a task known as credibility assessment. Of course, many of the stories offered by (guilty) suspects in the context of an interrogation are lies, such as false denials and alibis. With this knowledge, most police interviewers receive extensive training in deception detection and are highly motivated to use their training to catch liars. Sometimes, however, traditional police training may not enhance, and may even impair, the ability to accurately assess credibility (e.g., Kassin & Fong, 1999; Meissner & Kassin, 2002; Vrij, Mann, & Fisher, 2006). For example, some police training encourages the use of emotion-based, stereotypical signs of lying such as “shifty eyes”, gaze aversion, and nervous gestures, rather than empirically based cues to deception (e.g., Mann, Vrij, & Bull, 2004; Strömwall & Granhag, 2003; Vrij, 2004). Even empirically-based training programs aimed at improving deception detection ability have produced only modest improvements in performance (see Masip, Sporer, Garrido, & Herero, 2005; Vrij, Evans, Akehurst, & Mann, 2004). In examining the scientific literature, the most successful deception detection training program to date was by Porter, Woodworth, and Birt (2000) who provided evidence-based training to a group of Canadian parole officers over a two-day workshop. By the end of training, the ability of the parole officers to detect deception in videotaped speakers had improved significantly, from an average of 40.4% accuracy at baseline (performance that, alarmingly, was below chance) to 76.7% by the end of training. However, in general, police, judges, and other legal decision-makers generally perform around the level of chance in detecting deception (e.g., Bond & DePaulo, 2006; Ekman & O’Sullivan, 1991; Granhag & Stömmwall, 2005). Further, it is possible that investigators
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might even work too hard in this context. Porter, McCabe et al. (2007) identified a motivational impairment effect such that a high level of motivation in a deception detection task was negatively associated with accuracy (also see Ask & Granhag, 2007).

When police investigators believe that a suspect may have lied during an interview, they often rely on a polygraph examination to further assess his/her honesty. However, the polygraph has limitations that bring into question its widespread application. The control question test (the most common form of polygraph testing) can take several hours to complete, has a high false positive rate, and lacks both standardization and a sound theoretical foundation (e.g., Ben-Shakhar & Elaad, 2003; Gale, 1988; Wrightsman & Porter, 2006). The rarely-used Guilty Knowledge Test (GKT) version of the polygraph, improving upon the control question test, is based on the assumption that greater physiological responses will occur when someone is presented with familiar information (i.e., an awareness of crime-related details) than unfamiliar information concerning a crime. A meta-analysis by Ben-Shakhar and Elaad (2003) suggests that the GKT can reasonably discriminate those who do and do not have guilty knowledge. However, one of the few field studies using the GKT indicated that it correctly identified most innocent individuals (98% of the time), but had a high false negative rate, identifying only 42% of deceptive individuals (Elaad, 1990). Recent advances with the GKT paradigm have relied on event-related potentials (ERP; using the P300 wave) as a physiological indicator of deceit. While preliminary research has yielded promising findings (e.g., Miller, Baratta, Wynveen, & Rosenfeld, 2001), the technique requires additional research before it can be used in the field. Moreover, the training required to properly implement the GKT test and accurately analyze the ERP results is extensive, the equipment is expensive and often impractical in forensic settings, and the procedure can be time consuming. Thus, the development of a valid, time efficient, and user-friendly means of screening for deception would be of great benefit in police interviews.

A promising and more “user friendly” approach to detecting deception is the strategic use of particular questions about a crime followed by a careful consideration of the response patterns by the suspect. For example, one possibility is that deceptive witnesses will go “over the top” in their explanations and amount of detail, and “protest” their innocence too much. In one of the only studies to examine exaggerated features within intentionally fabricated experiences, Porter, Yuille and Lehman (1999) found that narratives concerning fabricated childhood events were more vivid, richer in detail, contained fewer admissions of lack of memory, and were self-rated as more stressful than truthful accounts. Porter and colleagues concluded that, in an attempt to seem credible, deceptive individuals were exaggerating their stories. This principle is witnessed in patterns of behaviour associated with faked, or malingering, mental illness (e.g., Early, 1990; Edens, Otto, & Dwyer, 1998; Edens et al., 2001; McGuire, 1999, 2002; Peters, Jelicic, Op Heij, & Merckelbach, 2006; Resnick, 1997; Rogers, 1997). Malingers of mental illness tend to endorse extremely severe or rare symptoms (relative to those who truly have the mental illness) or apparently genuine, but actually invalid symptoms. Further, Porter, Peace, and Emmett (2006) found that fabricated post-traumatic stress disorder was associated with extreme ratings on multiple, diverse psychological measures of emotional distress. In fact, deceivers can reveal their exaggerations to the point of performing in a manner that is beyond statistical probability. Bylin (2000) found that people who mangle amnesia score below chance on a memory task, while actual amnesiacs scored above chance.

Relying on the exaggeration principle, researchers recently began to test the utility of self-report instruments to screen for deception (e.g., Greene, 1997; Jelicic, Merckelbach, & van Bergen, 2004a; Jelicic, Merckelbach, & van Bergen, 2004b; Merckelbach & Smith, 2003;Smith & Burger, 1997; Weinborn, Orr, Woods, Conover, & Feix, 2003). For example, symptom validity testing (SVT; see Bianchini, Mathias, & Greve, 2001) is a self-report procedure that has been used to detect false claims of amnesia in criminal defendants. The SVT paradigm involves presenting a list of forced choice recognition items to a defendant, with only two options: either a true crime detail or a plausible, but false, detail. The assumption is that genuine amnesiacs will show a random response pattern given their lack of memory for the crime, while those who feign amnesia will exaggerate their apparent lack of crime knowledge by excessively underreporting true crime details. To test this hypothesis, Merckelbach, Hau er, and Rassin (2002) instructed participants to commit a mock theft of money and then complete a SVT (15 forced choice items) while feigning amnesia for the crime. They found that about 40% of the participants performed significantly below chance (i.e., they exaggerated the level of their ignorance). Jelicic et al. (2004b) improved upon the procedures of Merckelbach et al. (2002) by including bogus items (no correct answer) with the critical items to make SVT less transparent. They also had participants steal something more embarrassing than money (an erotic magazine) to make the task more emotionally involving. In this case, the SVT contained 25 forced choice critical items for the crime and crime scene (e.g.,
“the magazine that was stolen was”: a) Penthouse or b) Playboy), as well as 25 unrelated bogus items. In this case, 59% of participants faking amnesia had scores that were below chance, while a minority (26%) scored in the random response range. This pattern was foreshadowed by Nathaniel Hawthorne’s observation that “accuracy is the twin brother of honesty; inaccuracy, of dishonesty.”

The Present Study
These previous findings provide a foundation for making predictions about the strategies people may use to avoid incriminating themselves during police interviews. In particular, it may be that guilty suspects denying knowledge of a crime may “exaggerate their ignorance” and perform worse than chance on questions about the crime and surrounding details that make up the crime scene. Thus, the purpose of this study was to evaluate the response patterns of guilty and innocent suspects when asked questions about their knowledge of, and involvement in, a mock crime. Borrowing from the principles of the GKT and the SVT, a self-report Guilty Knowledge Questionnaire (GKQ) was created for this purpose. The GKQ contained a series of multiple-choice questions regarding the mock theft. Participants, undergraduate students who had agreed to volunteer for this project, were randomly assigned to one of four instruction groups reflecting different levels of knowledge of the theft. Deceptive perpetrators were asked to commit the mock theft and then lie about it and attempt to evade detection when responding to questions, while honest perpetrators were instructed to respond truthfully to all questions about their involvement in the theft. Scene witnesses were exposed to the physical location of the crime (i.e., crime scene), but did not commit or have knowledge of the theft. Finally, naïve responders had no knowledge of the theft or crime scene. The response patterns of the four groups were compared in relation to their response accuracy for scene and theft-knowledge on the GKQ. We expected that deceptive perpetrators would exaggerate their lack of knowledge about theft-related details in an effort to maintain the appearance of innocence and enhance their credibility. As such, these individuals were expected to avoid the responses on the GKQ that were reflective of guilty knowledge and thus, demonstrate a lower level of accuracy than the responding of the naïve suspects (as well as lower accuracy than the partial knowledge responding of scene witnesses, and the truthful responding of honest perpetrators who were expected to show the highest level of knowledge).

METHOD
Participants
Seventy-nine undergraduate students (27 males, 52 females) participated. Participants were randomly assigned to one of four instruction groups: Deceptive Perpetrators, Honest Perpetrators, Scene Witnesses or Naïve Responders. Participants’ ages ranged from 18 to 39 years ($M = 21.2, SD = 4.02$). Participants received course credits for participation.

Materials
Guilty Knowledge Questionnaire (GKQ): The GKQ, created for the present study, was modelled after the question structure used in the guilty knowledge version of the polygraph and symptom validity testing for malingering. It consisted of 40 multiple-choice questions. For each question, five alternative responses were offered, one of which was factually correct. The placement of the correct response within the alternatives was randomized across items. Twenty questions in the GKQ related to crime scene knowledge, while the remaining 20 items assessed knowledge of the theft itself. Scene knowledge items inquired about characteristics of the location where the staged theft had occurred (e.g., “The item was stolen from which room? If you are the thief, you will know it was …: a) blue door, b) white door, c) yellow door d) red door, or e) black door”). The theft-knowledge questions inquired about details of the theft itself (e.g., “What did you attempt to steal from the room? If you are the thief, you will know it was …: a) a palm pilot, b) money, c) a wallet, d) a mini tape recorder, or e) a computer software CD”). Thus, “theft-knowledge” questions focused on knowledge that only perpetrators of the crime would possess, while “scene-knowledge” questions focused on knowledge that could be gained simply by being present at the scene.

To ensure that the GKQ items represented knowledge that would be detected only by chance in the Naïve Responders group and above chance by the Honest Perpetrator group, the response patterns of these two groups were examined using chi-square analyses. First, any items detected by the Naïve Responders at an above or below chance level were removed from the GKQ. Thus, remaining items were those that could only be selected at chance by someone who had no knowledge of the theft or of the physical location in which the theft had occurred. This adjustment reduced the number of GKQ items to 27. Of the remaining items, only those for which Honest Perpetrators could reliably (above chance) select the correct response were retained. This criterion further reduced the GKQ by 3 items. The final GKQ consisted of 24 items, 14 of which represented theft knowledge and 10 were of scene knowledge.
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**Procedure**
A 2 x 4 mixed design was employed, with GKQ item type (scene knowledge vs. theft-knowledge) as a within-subject variable and credibility condition (Deceptive Perpetrator, Honest Perpetrator, Scene Witness and Naïve Responder) as the between-subjects variable. Participants were met individually and informed that the purpose of the study was to develop a new interrogation method for use by police investigators. For all participants, a confederate acted as the “interrogator” and met participants individually in an “interrogation room,” empty except for a table and two chairs. The confederate was blind to the credibility group to which the participant had been assigned. The interrogator accused each participant of involvement in an alleged theft, but provided no details about the theft. The interrogator demanded that each participant answer a series of written questions (the GKQ) about the theft before being interrogated further (no subsequent interrogation occurred). It was asked of all participants that they complete each item on the questionnaire even if it required guessing the answers.

Prior to being accused by the interrogator, participants were assigned to one of the four credibility conditions. Participants in the Deceptive and Honest Perpetrator groups were instructed to proceed to a specific, infrequently used, office in the psychology department. At the office, participants were instructed to steal a $100 bill and were left alone so that they could search the room and locate the money in a locked cabinet. The key to unlock the cabinet was in a box in another cabinet in the room. The room also contained a third cabinet, a bookshelf, a chair, two stools, a desk, a painting on the wall, and a book bag. Perpetrators were in the room for about two minutes. After the money was located, both perpetrator groups were then to return to the investigator’s interrogation room on another floor. When confronted by the interrogator, Deceptive Perpetrators were asked to do their best to evade detection and to maintain this deception when completing the GKQ. Honest Perpetrators (control group 1) were asked to confess their knowledge of the theft and the scene when responding to the GKQ.

As with the Deceptive and Honest Perpetrator groups, the Scene Witnesses were asked to proceed to and enter the same room as above. They spent about two minutes in the room, but were not made aware of the theft nor exposed to the stolen item. As such, they witnessed the details related to the environment in which the theft occurred, but had no knowledge of the theft itself. The experimenter explained that an interviewer might ask him/her about something missing from the room and that it was the participant’s task to respond honestly when completing the GKQ about their knowledge. Participants in the Naïve Responder group (control group 2) were asked to wait in an unrelated room until an interviewer came to speak with them. They were told to respond honestly to the GKQ and to guess at the answers if necessary. This group did not commit the theft and had no knowledge of the scene. At the completion of the study, all participants were debriefed and asked not to discuss the study with anyone until after the study had been completed.

The major dependent measure was the participants’ accuracy on the GKQ. Total GKQ accuracy was measured as the percentage of responses made by participants across the 24 GKQ items. Accuracy also was calculated separately for scene knowledge and the theft-knowledge items.

**Results**
To examine the effect of credibility condition on the accuracy of GKQ responses for scene knowledge and theft-knowledge details, a 2 X 4 mixed MANOVA was conducted. GKQ knowledge type was the within-subjects independent variable and credibility condition was the between-subjects independent variable, while percentage accuracy rates for the two knowledge types were the dependent variables. The MANOVA indicated significant main effects for both knowledge type, $F(1, 74) = 5.32, p = .024, \eta^2 = .07$, and credibility condition, $F(3, 74) = 74.72, p < .001, \eta^2 = .75$. In addition, there was a significant knowledge type X credibility condition interaction, $F(3, 74) = 36.27, p < .001, \eta^2 = .59$.

The main effect of knowledge type indicated that participants were less accurate in endorsing scene knowledge ($M = 38.54\%, SD = 21.07$) than they were theft-knowledge ($M = 41.21\%, SD = 29.12$). For the main effect of credibility condition, pair-wise comparisons (all $p$s > .001) indicated that honest perpetrators endorsed significantly more accurate overall knowledge ($M = 72.77\%, SD = 5.14$) than scene witnesses ($M = 41.32\%, SD = 5.14$), naïve responders ($M = 22.50\%, SD = 5.392$), and deceptive perpetrators ($M = 25.54\%, SD = 5.14$). Scene witnesses were more accurate than naïve responders and deceptive perpetrators (all $p$s > .001), but there was no significant difference in accuracy between naïve responders and deceptive perpetrators ($p > .05$).

When the interaction effect between knowledge type and credibility condition was considered a different pattern emerged (see Table 1). First, honest perpetrators had a higher mean accuracy for theft knowledge than for scene knowledge, $t(17) = 9.86, p < .001$. As expected, scene witnesses had a higher mean accuracy for scene knowledge (than for theft knowledge, $t(19) = 3.90, p < .001$, and naïve responders did not significantly differ on their accuracy rates for scene and theft knowledge, $t(19)$
= 1.49, \( p > .05 \). Notably, the mean accuracy rate for scene knowledge among the deceptive perpetrators was significantly greater than they achieved for the theft knowledge, \( t(19) = 3.08, p < .01 \).

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Credibility Condition</th>
<th>Scene Knowledge M (SD)</th>
<th>Theft Knowledge M (SD)</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Honest Perpetrator</td>
<td>56.67 (17.49)</td>
<td>88.89 (11.29)***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scene Witness</td>
<td>48.00 (12.81)</td>
<td>34.64 (10.17)***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Naïve Responder</td>
<td>19.50 (12.76)</td>
<td>25.00 (9.97)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deceptive Perpetrator</td>
<td>30.00 (18.06)</td>
<td>21.07 (14.74)**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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\*\( p < .05 \), **\( p < .01 \), ***\( p < .001 \).

Figure 1 depicts the interaction effect as it occurred between naïve responders and deceptive perpetrators. As the figure demonstrates, deceptive perpetrators reported elevated knowledge of the scene (30%), but only slightly minimized their true knowledge of the theft (21%) relative to the accuracy response patterns of the naïve responders (19.5% accuracy for scene knowledge and 25% accuracy for theft knowledge).

DISCUSSION

Both empirical research and injustices in the legal system have established that traditional approaches to deception detection by police and other legal decision-makers alike may lack validity (see Meissner & Kassin, 2002; Porter & ten Brinke, 2007; Vrij, 2008; Vrij, Mann, & Fisher, 2006). One problem concerns limitations of specific tools such as the polygraph and misguided strategies for interpreting behavioural signs that supposedly reflect deception. However, even before such techniques are implemented, police investigative approaches can influence the reliability of the information garnered from suspects. Clearly, police actions cannot contravene the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms (1982), requiring that suspects be informed of their right to a lawyer, or the common law right to remain silent and not make incriminating statements. However, as confirmed in the R. v. Oickle (2000) case, police are allowed by law to misrepresent certain facts of the case during an investigatory interview, such as making false claims about evidence implicating the suspect, such as a “failed” polygraph test (see the Alberta case Dix v. Canada (A.G.) (2002). Further, while the Canadian Supreme Court has decided that imminent physical threats by a police officer are not permissible, the use of “veiled threats” or “inducements” may be acceptable at times. However, the problem with these approaches is the growing recognition that they can lead to false confessions (e.g., Kassin, 2005). As such, it is essential that novel strategies for improving credibility assessments be devised and tested. In particular, a theoretically-sound and empirically-validated approach that would allow perpetrators - but not innocent suspects - to implicate themselves without the need for police deception or false inducements could be an improvement over traditional techniques.

In this study, we examined the manner in which student liars attempt to conceal their guilty knowledge through an analysis of their responses to direct questions about a mock crime. Based on previous work, particularly in the area of malingering, we predicted that deceptive perpetrators in a crime investigation would use detectable strategies to avoid incriminating themselves. Specifically, we predicted that their denial of knowledge concerning the crime would be manifested in a questionnaire as “exaggerated ignorance”, possibly exhibiting worse performance than naïve suspects on questions about the crime and/or scene where the crime occurred.

As expected, honest perpetrators provided the most accurate information on the GKQ concerning both the theft and scene relative to the other three groups. This indicates that the GKQ effectively elicited a detailed representation of the knowledge possessed by a perpetrator regarding the theft. Innocent witnesses also self-reported a high level of accurate information about the scene, but, as expected, demonstrated a low level of knowledge concerning the mock theft itself. As hypothesized, participants who did not commit the mock theft and who were not exposed to the scene also reported a low level of general knowledge on the GKQ. Of greatest interest here was the response patterns exhibited by the deceptive perpetrators. Contrary to our hypothesis, such perpetrators appeared to use a successful deception strategy
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by successfully emulating the response patterns of those who had no prior knowledge of any theft or scene-related details whatsoever. In other words, in their responses to the scene and theft specific questions as a whole, the deceptive perpetrators did not exaggerate a lack of knowledge to a level below that of naïve responders. A similar response pattern was previously found by Jelicic et al. (2004b) in a sub-group of their participants who completed a self-report memory test of malingering amnesia for a crime. Thus, the deceptive perpetrators appeared to be cognizant of the fact that they would appear guilty if they avoided too many correct responses.

However, when considering the scene and theft-related information separately, deceptive perpetrators were unable to be fully convincing with their strategies of concealment. Importantly, they exhibited a pattern of responses that differed from naïve responders. Unlike naïve, innocent suspects, the deceptive perpetrators were more accurate in their responses to inquiries about scene information than they were theft-knowledge. A significant interaction effect clearly revealed a strategy in which they acknowledged some memory of the scene, while attempting to minimize their knowledge of the crime. On the other hand, the accuracy of the naïve responders was virtually the same concerning the scene and theft-related information. Thus, while deceptive perpetrators are willing to reveal some information about a crime, they are more likely to admit knowledge that will not directly incriminate them.

Thus, overall, perpetrators had enough insight into impression management strategies to avoid exaggerating their ignorance in an obvious way and be caught in a lie. This is consistent with previous findings suggesting that deceptive individuals closely monitor their verbal and non-verbal behaviours when trying to mislead others. Vrij and Mann (2001) examined the behaviour of a murder suspect during a police interview, finding that he was able to avoid exhibiting nervous behaviours while lying, resulting in the neglect of body movements, or to an active concealment of “guilty” behaviours on the part of the suspect. The current findings support the notion that liars are able to suppress response patterns that may betray their deception. Guilty suspects would be expected to tell the truth as much as possible and lie only to conceal directly incriminating details to reduce the likelihood of betraying the lie (e.g., Porter & Yuille, 1995). However, importantly, our results suggest that attention to more subtle patterns of responding concerning the scene and theft separately may be beneficial to investigators. Further research is needed to examine more closely the specific strategies individuals use to selectively provide accurate/inaccurate information to avoid getting caught in their lies.

Some limitations to our study should be noted. Obviously, as with any study using a mock crime, the motivation of the perpetrators to successfully evade detection was far lower than in an actual investigation. Extreme motivation to lie successfully could result in a different pattern of responses, perhaps in the direction of increased exaggeration and more obvious deception in line with the motivational impairment effect seen with liars in general (e.g., DePaulo, Blank, Swaim, & Hairfield, 1992; DePaulo & Kirkestol, 1988; DePaulo et al., 2003). Unlike in forensic settings, the deceptive perpetrators in the current study were not at risk of punishment should they admit knowledge of details of the crime. If possible, future research should involve collaborations with the police in their actual interviews to examine responding to this type of self-report questionnaire in light of subsequent “ground truth” evidence (e.g., DNA). Future laboratory studies should examine deceptive response patterns for a broader array of mock offences to determine whether these patterns change as a function of the nature of the “crime”. The use of more emotionally provocative misdeeds, such as the embarrassing situation used by Jelicic et al. (2004b), may be useful. Further, the current study focused primarily on the response patterns of deceptive perpetrators and did not include a condition of innocent witnesses to the commission of the mock theft. Thus, additional research is needed to determine the specific response styles and credibility strategies that would differentiate crime witnesses from perpetrators. Although the validity of this type of self-report instrument in crime investigations may ultimately be established through research, there is a practical concern that may limit its implementation and warrants discussion. As noted by Elaad (1990) in reference to the GKT, there are difficulties in designing appropriate test questions for the GKT outside of a lab environment. In actual investigations, the investigator cannot always be certain of the knowledge a perpetrator would have obtained during the commission of a crime. The selection of crime items must be carefully considered in order to capture a range of significant details that a perpetrator would be reasonably expected to know (i.e., weapon used, gender of the victim, item stolen, manner of death, etc.), rather than irrelevant or peripheral aspects of a crime scene (e.g., colour of the walls, type of furniture, etc.). This is supported by our own data indicating that the honest suspects had more difficulty recognizing scene knowledge details than they did details of the crime.

In conclusion, the present study suggests that dece-
tive perpetrators attempt to conceal their guilty knowledge by mirroring the response style of a naïve suspect. However, upon closer examination, deceptive perpetrators are more likely to concede knowledge of less incriminating scene details rather than details about the crime itself. Continued research efforts on the nature of deceptive response patterns will facilitate the development of effective deception detection strategies for use in police interviews.

REFERENCES


