

The Use of Participant-Confederates in Examining Behavior Among the Falsely Accused: A Pilot Study

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INTRODUCTION

Approximately 25% of individuals who have been exonerated through DNA have made a false admission of guilt (Innocence Project, 2011).

Individuals sometimes falsely confess in order to protect the true perpetrator (Malloy et al., 2014). In these cases, the false confessor and the perpetrator usually have a pre-existing relationship. For example, in Gudjonsson et al.'s (2007) study, Icelandic students reported falsely confessing for friends (70%), relatives (14%), and romantic partners (8%).

In behavioral studies, researchers have primarily focused on identifying coercive elements of interrogations and characteristics of confessors that increase the likelihood of false confessions, rather than examining potential relationship factors between the perpetrator and the false confessor.

Russano et al.'s (2005) cheating paradigm has been widely used. It involves a researcher-confederate pretending to be a participant who cheats on a test. Real participants, who do not know the confederate, are then accused of cheating.

This pilot study examined whether Russano et al.'s (2005) cheating paradigm could be modified to include a participant-confederate who is either a stranger or a friend. If such a modification is possible then researchers have the means to better examine how relationship factors relate to false confessions.

METHOD

Participants

Participants ($N = 36$) were undergraduate students who received course credit in exchange for their participation. On average, participants were 19.03 years old ($SD = 1.38$). The majority of the sample was female ($n = 24$). Participants primarily identified as European American/Caucasian (46%), African American/Black (22%), and Latin American/Hispanic (14%).

Design

This behavioral study utilized a 2 (relationship closeness: stranger vs. friend) x 2 (gender: male vs. female) between-subjects factorial design.

Procedures

Same-sex pairs of strangers and pairs of friends signed up for a study purporting to measure people's ability to encode/decode emotion via text messages.

Participants engaged in a short social exchange and then were separated to complete personality measures and filler tasks associated with the cover story.

METHOD CONTINUED

Participants were randomly assigned to the role of participant-confederate or innocent-participant. Participant-confederates were told the true purpose of the study and asked if they were willing to take part in a staged cheating incident and later send a text message plea asking their partner to falsely confess.

Participants were then placed in the same room to complete a difficult knowledge test and given an incentive to cheat (i.e., money for correct answers). The participant-confederate 'happened' to notice the answer key was left out and copied the answers. Participants were then separated, and the innocent-participant received the plea for help.

Next, a researcher confronted innocent-participants with a false accusation. Participants either signed a statement of confession or innocence. Those that maintained their innocence were pressured to give evidence against their partner (i.e., the participant-confederate).

RESULTS

There were 18 sessions conducted during the Fall 2017 semester.

- Two stranger sessions were terminated due to high levels of participant stress.
- Two stranger sessions were terminated due to technological issues.
- One male participant was suspicious of the true purpose of the study. His data were excluded from subsequent results.

The primary results are discussed below and shown in Figure 1.

Innocent-Participant Behavior from 13 sessions

Three participants falsely confessed to cheating (female) and 10 participants maintained their innocence (7 females and 3 males).

- Of the 10 participants that maintained their innocence, eight participants (5 females and 3 males) offered some kind of evidence against partner (i.e., said they believed their partner cheated, showed the text message, or said they explicitly saw their partner cheat).

Innocent-Participant Behavior from 9 sessions with Strangers

One participant confessed (female) and eight participants maintained their innocence (5 females and 3 males).

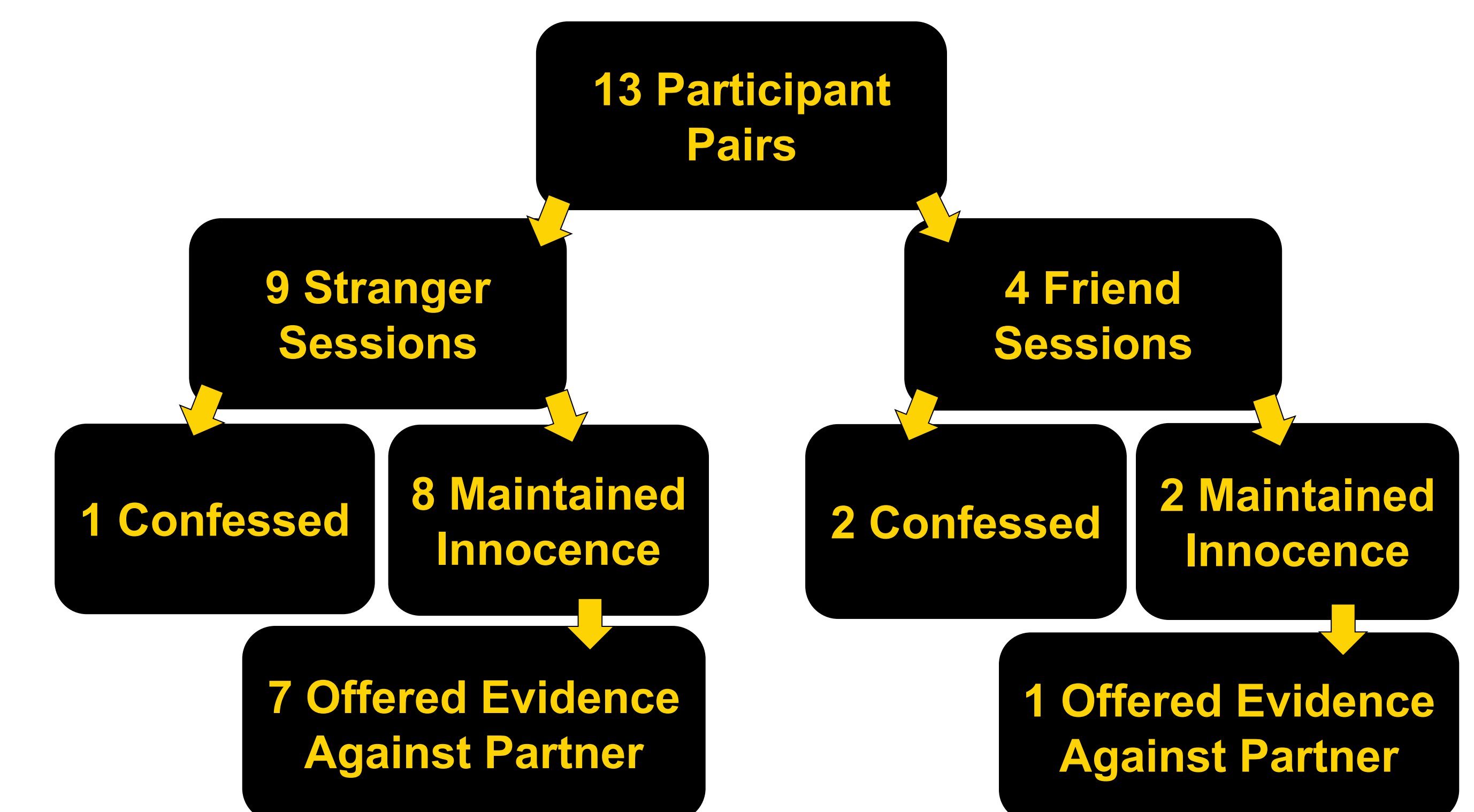
- Of the eight participants that maintained their innocence, seven offered some kind of evidence against their partner (4 females and 3 males).

RESULTS CONTINUED

Innocent-Participant Behavior from 4 sessions with Friends
Two participants confessed and two maintained their innocence (all female).

- Of the two that maintained their innocence, one offered some kind of evidence against partner (i.e., statement that their partner cheated).

Figure 1. Innocent-Participant Behavior



DISCUSSION

Although the sample size was low and the dataset included unequal groups, the results were trending in interesting ways.

- Friends appeared to be more likely to confess (50%) than strangers (11%).
- Friends who maintained innocence appeared to be less likely to offer evidence against their partner (50%) than strangers (80%).

The rate of suspicion appeared low (1 out of 14 sessions); however, some instances of suspicion were difficult to judge. We are currently modifying procedures to better identify suspicious in participant.

Given that some participants in both the stranger and the friend conditions confessed, it appears the Russano et al. (2005) cheating paradigm can be modified for use with participant-confederates. This would allow researchers to examine how relationship factors influence the occurrence of false confessions.

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