

The Potential for Faking on Old and New MMPI/MMPI-2 PTSD Scales

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Abstract

The potential for faking on the MMPI Acute and Chronic PTSD scales (Gaston et al, In Press) and on the PK scale was assessed. Twelve psychologists specialised in treating PTSD were instructed to complete the MMPI "as if" they pretended to have acute PTSD. Ninety-eight acute and 67 chronic PTSD adult patients also completed the MMPI. The Chronic PTSD scale does not fare better than the MMPI PK scale (Keane et al., 1984) at detecting falsifying respondents from PTSD patients. However, members of the falsifier group tend to score lower than the Acute PTSD group on the Acute PTSD scale ($p < .01$). A specificity of 100% can be achieved by using a cut-off score of 22/32, thereby correctly classifying all falsifiers.

Introduction

Previously, Gaston, Brunet, Koszycki, and Bradwejn (1996) argued that the widely used MMPI PK scale for PTSD (Keane, Malloy, & Fairbank, 1984) was unsatisfactory for use in a population of mixed civilian trauma victims. These authors suggested that civilian trauma is different from military trauma, especially acute civilian PTSD.

Gaston, Brunet, Koszycki, and Bradwejn (In Press) proposed a new set of MMPI/MMPI-2 scales designed to assess Acute and Chronic PTSD of civilian origin.

Because the MMPI (Hathaway & McKinley, 1970) is sometimes used in the litigation process, we were interested to know to what extent the MMPI Acute and Chronic PTSD scales, along with the PK scale, were immune to faking.

Methods

Respondents: 12 psychologists specialised in the treating PTSD (**falsifier GP**).
98 treatment seeking patients with acute PTSD (**Acute PTSD GP**).
67 treatment seeking patients with chronic PTSD (**Chronic PTSD GP**).
See **Table 1** for the socio-demographic data.

Diagnosis: **SCID** for **DSM-III-R** (Spitzer, Williams, & Gibbon, 1987).
Co-morbidity: 30% and 58% in the Acute and Chronic PTSD GPS respectively.
PTSD chronicity: defined as having the disorder for 6 months or more.
No respondent was involved in litigation at the time of the study.

Instruments: **MMPI** form R (Hathaway & McKinley, 1970).
MMPI PK scale (Keane, et al, 1984).
Acute and Chronic MMPI PTSD scales (Gaston et al., In Press). See the **Appendix** for more information.

Procedure: The Acute and Chronic PTSD GPS completed the MMPI as part of their intake.
The falsifier group was asked to complete the MMPI “as if” they pretended to have Acute PTSD.

Table 1

Socio-demographic data

Acute PTSD GP

n = 98
24 men & 74 women
Age: $M=36.6$
 $SD=11.6$

PTSD Symptoms

(weeks):
 $M=6.4$ $SD=5.3$

Chronic PTSD GP

n = 67
26 men & 41 women
Age: $M=37.0$
 $SD=10.6$

PTSD Symptoms

(weeks):
 $M=82.0$
 $SD=101.3$

Falsifiers GP

n = 12
4 men & 8 women
Age: $M=37.3$
 $SD=13.5$

Note: One outlier was deleted because her score on all clinical scales was $T < 60$. Her other scores were 1 on the PK scale, 7 on the Chronic PTSD scale and 19 on the Acute PTSD scale. Analyses were run with $n = 11$ falsifiers.

Results

Mean MMPI profiles: Figure 1 shows that the Acute PTSD, Chronic PTSD and Falsifier group mean MMPI profiles are strikingly similar. What distinguishes them is the overall level of pathology (T scores > 70). The Falsifier group show the most severe level of pathology.

Groups (3) by scales (3) ANOVAs: Three one-way ANOVAs were conducted (see Table 2). On both the PK scale and the Chronic PTSD scale, the falsifier group scored significantly higher than the Chronic and Acute PTSD groups. Moreover, on the Acute PTSD scale, the falsifier group did not succeed in obtaining the highest mean score compared to the Acute and Chronic PTSD groups.

Detecting PTSD falsifiers: On the Acute PTSD scale, a cut-off of 22 correctly classified all of the falsifier group. (See Table 3). However, Gaston et al. (In Press) recommended a cut-off between 19-21 for an improved sensitivity and a more balanced hit rate.

Discussions

The MMPI profiles: The psychologists instructed to fake Acute PTSD yielded a profile that closely resembles that of the chronic PTSD group. In fact, the falsifier group profile is strikingly similar to the one of Vietnam Veterans with Chronic PTSD (see **Figure 2**).

The ANOVAS: On both the PK scale and the Chronic PTSD scale, members of the falsifier group scored, again, in a range indicative of very severe chronic PTSD.

Detecting PTSD falsifiers: Members of the Falsifier group failed to obtain high scores (indicative of Acute PTSD) on the Acute PTSD scale: All scores equal or above 22 were indicative of true Acute PTSD.

Concluding Remarks

Acute PTSD seems difficult to fake. Psychologists instructed to do so (1) yielded a chronic-like PTSD profile, (2) obtained scores on the PK and on the Chronic PTSD scales indicative of chronic PTSD, and (3) could not obtain a high score on the Acute PTSD scale. A cut-off score of 22 on the Acute PTSD scale yields a specificity of 100% in this sample. However, many respondents from the Acute PTSD group obtained a score below 22 as well.

To detect someone faking Acute PTSD, the best strategy would probably be to look at his or her results on all three PTSD scales and MMPI profile and see if they match. Someone claiming to have acute PTSD should not concurrently have a high MMPI profile and high scores on the PK, Acute and Chronic PTSD.

Study limitations. It would be interesting to see if the current results can be replicated with other pools of falsifying respondents and with larger Ns as well.

References

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Appendix

The MMPI Acute PTSD Scale

The 32 items of the MMPI Acute PTSD scale are the following. Items endorsed as true are light-faced, while those endorsed as false are in boldface: 5, **9**, 10, **15**, **29**, 31, 32, 43, **46**, 74, 77, 107, 138, **141**, **152**, 153, **176**, 181, **182**, **188**, **191**, **236**, **237**, **277**, **301**, **307**, **321**, **351**, 367, 371, **375**, **391**.

The **MMPI-2** corresponding items (Butcher et al., 1989) are the following: 5, **10**, 11, **16**, **28**, 30, 31, 39, **43**, 62, 64, 95, 127, **129**, **140**, 141, **163**, 169, **170**, **173**, **178**, **215**, 217, **250**, **273**, **279**, **289**, 317, 335, 340, **346**, **362**.

The MMPI Chronic PTSD Scale

The 41 MMPI items of the Chronic PTSD scale are the following. Items endorsed as true are light-faced, while those endorsed as false are in boldface: 5, **9**, 10, **20**, 26, 31, 32, 43, 44, 48, **51**, 77, 89, 114, **126**, 127, **141**, **152**, 159, 161, 168, **169**, **176**, **188**, **190**, 238, **253**, 265, **277**, 278, 280, **281**, 303, 305, 328, **330**, 336, 348, **351**, 356, **391**.

The **MMPI-2** corresponding items (Butcher et al., 1989) are the following: 5, **10**, 11, **12**, 26, 30, 31, 39, 40, 60, **45**, 64, 76, 101, **112**, 113, **129**, **140**, 147, 149, 180, **186**, **163**, **173**, **176**, 218, **230**, 241, **250**, 251, **254**, **255**, 274, **277**, 31, **295**, 302, 315, 317, 325, **362**.