

## Assertion and Overcontrolled Hostility Among Mentally Disordered Murderers

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The Overcontrolled Hostility (*O-H*) subscale of the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory differentiates murderers without previous criminal records from men who have committed less serious assaults and murderers with extensive histories of assault. Murderers scoring high on the *O-H* scale are described as passive and unassertive on the basis of their histories, and psychometric correlates of the *O-H* scale support this description. The purpose of the present study was to determine whether men who had committed very severe assaults and who scored high on the *O-H* scale had assertion deficits that could be measured behaviorally. High *O-H* murderers or attempted murderers in a maximum security psychiatric institution were compared with low *O-H* murderers or attempted murderers, non-person offenders, and a control group of primarily unemployed men from the local community on a variety of assertion measures. The high *O-H* group was significantly less assertive than each of the other groups in role playing tasks and on a questionnaire that asked subjects how aggressive they would be in extremely provocative situations. These findings support the *O-H* construct and suggest that assertion training may be a useful therapeutic technique to employ with high *O-H* murderers.

Persons who commit extremely violent offenses against persons, that is, offenses that seriously injure or kill the victim, have been studied from a variety of perspectives. Despite numerous studies, however, controversy continues over the extent to which these offenses are situationally determined as opposed to the extent to which the characteristics of the offender play a causal role in the offense. Most psychologists would probably argue that murderous offenses are a result of an interaction between a particular situation and a person with particular characteristics (Monahan, 1981). The particular personal characteristics that enter into such interactions have, however, been difficult to identify, and the ability of psychological tests to differentiate violent offenders from others has been limited (Megargee, 1970). The failure to find unique personality characteristics among violent offenders has led to the sug-

gestion that different types of murderers or extremely violent men exist and should be studied separately (Toch, 1969) as well as to the development of new psychological tests to specifically assess violent offenders.

Among the most noteworthy of these more specifically designed instruments is the Overcontrolled Hostility (*O-H*) scale, which Megargee, Cook, and Mendelsohn (1967) empirically developed from the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (MMPI) in order to differentiate men who had committed extremely violent offenses from men who were moderately assaultive or who had committed nonviolent offenses. Some of the items of this scale reflect passivity (e.g., "At times I feel like swearing," scored false), but many have no clear thematic content (e.g., "I pray several times every week," scored true and "I like mechanics magazines," scored false). Megargee et al. linked the *O-H* scale and serious violent crime of a noninstrumental nature to assertive deficits in their description of overcontrolled individuals. "Since even the normal socially approved outlets for anger are unavailable, people of the chronically overcontrolled type are often subjected to extreme frustrations as they are exploited by

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spouses, co-workers and peers" (p. 520). Over time, Megargee hypothesized, these frustrations summate and lead to extremely violent acts.

Construct validity for the *O-H* scale comes from a variety of studies using different methods (Arnold, Quinsey, & Velner, 1977; Megargee, 1971). Megargee, Cook, and Mendelsohn showed that the *O-H* scale correlated positively with the self-control and good impression scales of the California Psychological Inventory, the *L* and *K* scales of the MMPI, and negatively with the impulsivity MMPI scale. In a similar vein, White, McAdoo, and Megargee (1973) found that high *O-H* scores were associated with low scores on Factor E (dominance, boldness, assertiveness) of the Sixteen Personality Factor Questionnaire in a sample of youthful offenders. Blackburn (1968) contrasted extremely and moderately assaultive psychiatric offenders. In harmony with Megargee's theory, he found that extremely violent offenders less often had a criminal record, were less frequently diagnosed as personality disordered, more often knew their victims, and scored higher on MMPI scales related to overcontrol than moderately assaultive offenders. In a subsequent investigation (Blackburn, 1971), it was found by means of a cluster analysis of the MMPI profiles of mentally abnormal murderers that types emerged consistent with the overcontrolled-undercontrolled dimension.

In contrast to Megargee's theory of overcontrolled hostility, McGurk (1981) has argued that two types of murderers exist: controlled and undercontrolled. Basically, McGurk asserts that persons labeled as overcontrolled are "normal" and has attempted to support this contention by examining the behavioral differences between undercontrolled and controlled murderers in a prison setting. The controlled murderers (defined by MMPI cluster analysis, not the *O-H* score), in contrast to the undercontrolled murderers, came from stable family backgrounds, had fewer previous assaultive offenses, had less previous psychiatric treatment, reported sick less often in prison, had fewer disciplinary prison offenses, and were rated by prison officers as more self sufficient and as having fewer training needs. McGurk concluded that

treatment for "controlled" persons is unnecessary, in sharp contrast to Megargee, who has argued that some form of psychotherapy could and should be used to help chronically overcontrolled murderers overcome their internal inhibitions.

From a behavioral point of view, Megargee appears to have identified a group of men with assertion deficits by means of psychological tests. Persons with deficits in assertion are likely to be similar to those described as "normal" by McGurk; specifically, unassertive persons are likely to make very good prison inmates because they are most cooperative with the institutional regime (cf. Rice & Quinsey, 1980). If overcontrolled or "controlled" murderers do have assertion deficits, both Megargee and McGurk are, in a sense, correct because offenders with assertion deficits often appear psychiatrically normal, exhibit excellent institutional adjustment, and do not usually have previous histories of hospitalization or imprisonment. Clearly, if high *O-H* murderers have assertive deficits, these deficits could plausibly be linked to violent crime in that they would directly affect how these persons respond to provocations. Of course, nonmurderers may also have assertive deficits (McGurk & McGurk, 1979). These two considerations simply mean that high *O-H* scores may have great treatment but little prognostic significance, except that one should predict a low frequency of high *O-H* assaultive crimes.

The purpose of the present study was to determine whether assertive deficits exist among extremely violent men scoring high on the *O-H* scale. If such behavioral deficits exist, they would resolve the controversy between McGurk and Megargee and indicate very clearly what form therapy for these individuals should take. The present study compared a variety of assertion measures among extremely violent male maximum security patients with either high or low *O-H* scores, non-person offenders, and control subjects from the local community.

## Method

### *Subjects*

All subjects were male. Nineteen community control subjects were recruited from a government employment

service. Subjects were between 18 and 50 years of age, were not fully employed, and denied previous institutionalization. They were paid a small sum for participating. A further control subject was recruited from the hospital clerical department. Maximum security patients who met certain criteria were recruited. Patients were selected to be between 18 and 50 years of age with IQs of above 90 as estimated by the Wechsler Adult Intelligence Scale (WAIS) Vocabulary subscale. Patients had to fall in one of the following three categories: (a) a charge of homicide or attempt homicide with an MMPI *O-H T* score of 70 or above, (b) a charge of homicide or attempt homicide with an *O-H T* score of 52 or lower, or (c) no history of offenses against persons. Eleven of the high *O-H* and 15 of the low *O-H* subjects had killed

at least one person in their admission offense. The MMPI testing for the patient subjects took place less than a year prior to their participation in this study; only patients with MMPI *F* < 22 were accepted.

The characteristics of the subjects are presented in the first 12 rows of Table 1. The unequal numbers of subjects in the groups were a result of difficulties in finding subjects who met the criteria. The high *O-H* subjects were slightly older and had had fewer previous psychiatric hospitalizations (excluding Oak Ridge admissions) than the other subjects. The two groups of extremely assaultive subjects were not statistically differentiated by any of these 12 variables (all *ps* > .10). With respect to legal status or documentation at the time of testing, 13 of the high *O-H* subjects, 8 of the low *O-H* subjects, and 2 of

Table 1  
*Characteristics of Subjects*

Variable	Group												High <i>O-H</i> vs. others <sup>a</sup> <i>p</i> <
	High <i>O-H</i>			Low <i>O-H</i>			Non-person			Community			
	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	
1. Number	14			18			15			20			
2. Age		29.57	8.47		28.28	7.36		26.27	5.63		23.35	5.37	.05
3. Psychotic	6			4			11			0			<i>ns</i>
4. Personality disorder	8			14			4			0			<i>ns</i>
5. <i>O-H</i> <sup>b</sup>		72.64	4.19		45.83	4.76		51.15	9.71				.0005
6. Verbal IQ		105.50	9.12		108.06	9.88		105.67	8.34				<i>ns</i>
7. Highest grade		9.86	2.36		9.61	1.77		10.13	1.59				<i>ns</i>
8. Unskilled or no occupation	8			12			14						<i>ns</i>
9. Ever married	6			8			6						<i>ns</i>
10. No. of corrections		1.57	2.13		1.67	3.00		2.00	3.20				<i>ns</i>
11. No. of hospitalizations		.50	.73		.83	.83		2.47	2.31				.05
12. Months in Oak Ridge		26.64	28.31		49.67	66.60		7.73	8.61				<i>ns</i>
13. Provocative Situation Questionnaire		2.91	.83		3.40	.53		3.40	.39		3.56	.62	.004
14. Fear of Negative Evaluation Scale		17.79	8.67		12.83	10.02		15.53	9.01		18.80	8.71	<i>ns</i>
15. Negative Assertion Questionnaire		5.50	2.41		6.83	3.78		7.13	2.55		6.40	2.96	<i>ns</i>
16. Letter assertion		1.43	.98		1.44	.90		1.87	.88		1.65	.73	<i>ns</i>
17. Role play: Assertion		4.59	1.00		5.48	.53		5.29	1.13		5.91	.38	.0002
18. Role play: Confederate assertion		7.04	.65		7.24	.27		7.22	.09		7.37	.11	.01
19. Porteus Maze Test Qualitative score		10.79	8.41		11.11	10.11		13.67	10.16		8.55	5.27	<i>ns</i>

<sup>a</sup> All *ps* are two-tailed, based on *F* tests for continuous and  $\chi^2$  for categorical variables.

<sup>b</sup> Two non-person offenders did not have Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory data.

the non-person offenders had been found not guilty by reason of insanity for a criminal offense. Five of the high *O-H*, five of the low *O-H*, and none of the non-person offenders had been remanded for a psychiatric examination. Finally, one of the low *O-H* and 10 of the non-person offenders were involuntarily certified as mentally ill.

### Procedure

All subjects were contacted individually, and consent was obtained after the nature of the tasks was explained. All subjects were promised complete confidentiality. The research was conducted in a room at the end of a maximum security psychiatric hospital ward. Subjects were given five written tasks and one series of behavioral assertion tests (all described below). The Fear of Negative Evaluation Scale, the Negative Assertion Questionnaire, and one half of the Provocative Situation Questionnaire were given before the role plays, and the remaining tasks were given after.

### Measures

*Fear of Negative Evaluation Scale (FNE).* The FNE was designed to measure fear of loss of social approval (Watson & Friend, 1969). It is a 30-item scale with several characteristics relevant to the present study: (a) It is not correlated highly with socially desirable responding; (b) it appears to be related to negative assertion in terms of item content (e.g., "The disapproval of others would have little effect on me," scored false), and (c) has been related to peer ratings of social behavior (Arkowitz, Lichtenstein, McGovern, & Hines, 1975).

*Porteus Q Score.* The Porteus Maze Test yields a measure of "impulsiveness," the Qualitative or Q score, which reflects carelessness in tracing the mazes (Porteus, 1965). Using a simplified scoring procedure for the Q score, Schalling and Rosen (1968) successfully differentiated psychopathic from nonpsychopathic prison inmates. Roberts, Ericson, Riddle, and Bacon (1974) demonstrated that recidivism among delinquents was related to prerelease Q scores. In a laboratory operant task, Quinsey, Varney, and McCann (Note 1) found that the simplified Q score was negatively related to schedule-induced inhibition of responding among maximum security patients. Taken together, these findings suggest that the Q score should relate to undercontrolled aggression.

A Pearson product-moment correlation  $r$  of .94 was obtained between the Q scores of two research assistants who independently scored the mazes for a randomly selected 14 subjects.

*Negative Assertion Questionnaire (NAQ).* The NAQ was developed for use in the present study. Each of the 17 items describes some assertive or unassertive behavior. Items were selected to be very simply worded and to be relevant inside or outside an institution. The subject circles "yes" or "no" as the item applies to him; 10 items are scored "yes" and 7 "no." Examples of the items are as follows: "When someone acts like an asshole, I come right out and call him an asshole," scored "yes," and "If someone treats me badly, I am hurt but keep quiet," scored "no." Cronbach's alpha coefficient (based on all subjects) was .705, indicating a high degree of homogeneity among the items.

*Provocative Situation Questionnaire (PSQ).* The PSQ is comprised of 29 descriptions of moderately to extremely provocative situations. The rationale for the development of this instrument was that many offenders report responding to extreme provocations of a kind not sampled in assertion questionnaires. After each situation, the subject is asked to indicate: (a) how angry he would feel on a 7-point scale ranging from "not angry" to "moderately angry" to "very angry"; (b) what he would say to the person ("nothing, discuss the issue in a friendly manner, tell the person you are mad, swear at the person, insult the person, threaten to harm the person, threaten to kill the person"), and (c) what he would do to the person ("nothing, frown, get ready to fight, push, strike the person, attempt to harm the person, attempt to kill the person").

The situations involve provocative persons of varying types (male and female strangers, authority figures, and family members). Examples of three situations follow.

You and your wife go to a dance and have a few drinks. Some guy keeps asking her to dance and you sit by yourself drinking beer. After one of the sets she doesn't come back and you go to find her. When you go out into the hall to look, you find her necking with the guy she's been dancing with. Your wife looks scared and goes into the washroom but the guy says "Don't worry honey. I'll take care of him." You walk up to him and he pushes you on the chest, hard.

Your 3-year old son has been told time and again to stay away from your records. One day you come out of the kitchen and find he's playing with your best records by taking them out of their jackets and driving his trucks over them.

You are a prisoner in a local jail waiting to be called to your work area. A prison guard walks toward you angrily and says that if you're not going to come to work you can bloody well be locked up. When you protest that you didn't hear the call, he says "Don't hand me that B.S. Get back to your cell. I'm going to write up a disciplinary report on you."

Preliminary analyses of the PSQ indicated that the feel, say, and do responses showed exactly the same patterns and were very highly correlated. To simplify, therefore, the average of the feel, say, and do responses was computed for each item and subject prior to further analyses. Inter-item correlations yielded an alpha coefficient of .948; thus, despite the differences in content and stimulus persons among the items, the items all measured essentially the same phenomenon. Because of the high degree of item homogeneity, the subjects' average responses to all the items were used in the final analyses. This average was called the PSQ score.

### Role Plays

Five role-played scenes were enacted by each subject with a male confederate and five were enacted with a female confederate. Because the subjects were recruited by one of the confederates and informed consent was obtained by the same person, only one of the confederates was blind to group membership.

Before the role playing began, the subject was introduced to the camera operator who videotaped the in-

teractions from behind a one-way mirror and it was explained how the videotaping worked. Subjects were instructed to interact with the confederate as they would if it were a real situation. Before each role play the male confederate would read the instructions to the subject and make sure that he understood the situation.

The first situation (ordering a pizza from the female confederate) was not scored and was used solely as a warm-up. Each of the remaining nine situations required an assertive response on the part of the subject. Confederates were carefully rehearsed to ensure they behaved in the same way to all subjects. Role-play situations were selected so that they were unambiguous, easy for the confederates to maintain consistency in, and absorbing for the subjects. As an example, the subject's instructions for the fourth role play were, "You have begun watching your favourite television program. You want to give it all your attention so you don't want people to bother you. As you are watching, your wife comes in." The confederate's instructions were "Your husband is watching TV in the room you want to clean up. You begin picking up and vacuuming. You would like him to at least dust and move the furniture." Props included a TV set, a vacuum cleaner, and some chairs and cushions. The confederate "vacuumed" immediately in front of the TV set so that the subject could not see it and attempted to get him to help her until there was a very definite refusal and she was required to "turn off" the vacuum cleaner and move; otherwise, she persisted until it was clear that subject would not get to watch his program. The other eight role plays involved the subject (a) receiving the wrong change at a store, (b) having an unwanted visit by a relative at a hospital, (c) being pressured by a policeman to contribute to a charity, (d) having unwanted repairs done to his car, (e) attempting to get a parking lot attendant to let him park temporarily in a full lot, (f) attempting to go to a poker game instead of taking his mother-in-law shopping for unwanted furniture, (g) attempting to catch a bus instead of watching a female stranger's luggage while she made a phone call, and (h) attempting to refuse to lend his son the car.

Both subjects and confederates were rated on videotape by a trained female rater blind to subjects' group assignments. Ratings were made on a number of variables of which only "assertion" will be reported here. Assertion was rated on 9-point scale from 1 (no assertion) to 8 (overassertion) and 9 (extreme overassertion). Fourteen of the subjects were rated by a second female rater; the interrater agreement was satisfactory ( $r$  equaled .77 when the nine separate role plays for the 14 subjects were analyzed and .83 when the average assertion was used for the 14 subjects). Intercorrelations among the 9 role plays yielded an alpha coefficient of .783; the role plays thus appeared to tap the same underlying dimension and the average assertion score for each subject was used in further analyses.

### Letter Assertion

Subjects were given the following instructions "You have sent in the final exam for a correspondence course you have been taking. You need the bonus marks you get for this to give you a B average. You receive the following letter from your instructor: 'Dear Sir: Your exam has been misplaced and so I will enter a passing grade on your file. No bonus marks will be given. En-

quiries about future courses should be addressed to the Registrar's Office, do not address to me.—John Hancock.'" Subjects were asked to "write a short note in the space provided." The space began with "To\_\_\_\_\_" and ended with "From\_\_\_\_\_."

Subjects' written replies were rated on a 7-point assertion scale, where a 1 was given for no assertion, a 2 for a request that the exam be looked for again but that a "pass" will do, a 4 for a request to rewrite the exam, and a 7 for a confrontational reply emphasizing that the loss of the exam was not the subject's fault. These ratings were made by a female research assistant; a reliability assessment was conducted by having another female research assistant rate 14 of the letters; a Pearson product-moment correlation  $r$  of .91 was achieved.

### Treatment of the Data

Five measures of assertion (role play, FNE, PRQ, letter, and NAQ) were entered into a stepwise multiple discriminant analysis (using Wilks's criterion) that contrasted the high *O-H* subjects against the other three groups combined. This multivariate analysis was followed by contrasting the high *O-H* subjects with each of the other groups individually with one-tailed *t*-tests reflecting the hypothesis that high *O-H* subjects had assertive deficits.

### Results

The multiple discriminant analysis yielded very simple results. The high *O-H* subjects did, as hypothesized, have assertive deficits. Role-play assertion was the best discriminator, univariate  $F(1, 65) = 16.10, p < .0002$ , followed by the PSQ scores, univariate  $F(1, 65) = 8.74, p < .004$ . None of the other measures of assertion were used by the multiple discriminant analysis and none of the univariate  $F$ s approached significance. One canonical discriminant function involving role-play assertion and the PSQ was significant ( $p < .0001$ ); the canonical correlation was .51, and 81% of the 67 cases were correctly classified. The data for the role-play and PSQ measures are depicted in Figure 1.

One-tailed *t* tests showed that the high *O-H* subjects were less assertive in the role plays than the low *O-H* subjects,  $t(30) = 3.14, p < .005$ , the non-person offenders,  $t(27) = 1.71, p < .05$ , and the community subjects,  $t(32) = 5.24, p < .0005$ . As a check on the internal validity of the role plays, the assertiveness of the confederates was also rated. As shown in Table 1, the confederates were rated as very assertive, and the small standard deviations indicate high consistency. There was, however, a significant difference in the assertiveness of the confederates towards the

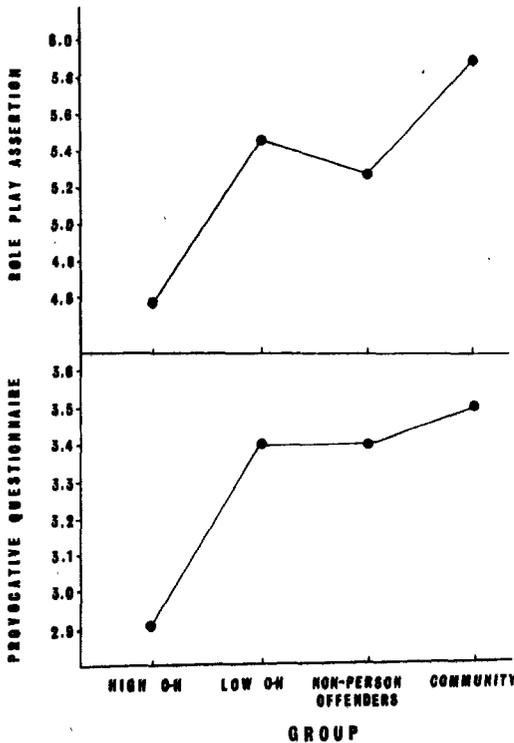


Figure 1. Group averages for the Provocative Situation Questionnaire and Role Play Assertion (OH = overcontrolled hostility).

high O-H subjects as opposed to the other three groups. Confederates were significantly less assertive toward the high O-H subjects. Examination of the videotapes indicated that this very small but consistent difference in confederate behavior was probably caused by the ready compliance of the high O-H subjects with the confederate's demands.

One-tailed *t* tests on the PSQ scores showed that the high O-H group was less assertive than the low O-H group,  $t(30) = 1.98, p < .05$ , the non-person offenders,  $t(27) = 2.00, p < .05$ , and the community controls,  $t(32) = 2.52, p < .01$ .

Curiously, the various measures of assertion were not highly correlated with each other. Role-play assertion did not correlate significantly with any of the questionnaire measures; for example, the correlation between role-play assertion and the PSQ was only .22 (65 *df*;  $p > .05$ ). Only two correlations among the five measures of assertion were significant, and both were expected: the NAQ with the FNE,  $r(65) = -.50, p < .01$ ,

and the NAQ with the PSQ,  $r(65) = .31, p < .05$ .

The O-H scale was not a substitute for an assertion measure, even though the extreme O-H offender groups differed on the assertion measures; when the O-H scores of the non-person offenders were correlated with the PSQ and role-play assertion, no significant results were obtained.

The Porteus Q scores did not differentiate the high O-H patients from the other groups, although the community subjects scored the lowest, as would be expected.

### Discussion

The finding that extremely assaultive high O-H scorers are less assertive in behavioral role-playing situations than low O-H persons who have committed extremely violent offenses and control subjects provides an important link between psychometrically derived theories of aggression and the behavioral literature. Our data indicate that high O-H murderers are not only less assertive than the subjects with whom they were compared but that their lack of assertion is a meaningful target for intervention. The assertive deficits of high O-H subjects were gross and unambiguous; for example, in the role-play situation where the subject is attempting to watch TV, the high O-H subjects would typically try to peer around the "wife" while she vacuumed and would eventually move the furniture and dust while stealing furtive glances at the TV program. In the situation where a female stranger asked them to watch her luggage, they would typically become progressively more anxious but in fact watch the luggage until they missed their bus.

Our findings, therefore, directly support Megargee's notion that high O-H murderers need psychotherapeutic treatment. It appears that the treatment of choice is assertion training. It is not being argued here that such an intervention would do much to reduce the recidivism rate of high O-H murderers because it would be expected to be low in any event; treatment might prevent a subsequent assault for the odd individual of this type but would improve the quality of life for many more. Unfortunately, however, the implementation of this form of treatment program is difficult in maximum security settings

where these individuals are typically held because assertive behaviors tend to be punished by institutional staff. Fortunately, many offenders are transferred to minimum security situations before their complete release, and such treatment may be more feasible in these settings.

The relation of the PSQ to role-play assertion is of some interest as these variables differentiated the groups in the same way and appear to measure aspects of assertion but in fact share very little variance in common. The PSQ did not correlate highly with the other written tests of assertion (the FNE, the NAQ, and the letter assertion measure). The PSQ, therefore, appears to measure something different. One could argue that responses to relatively extreme provocations are quite different from those occasioned by everyday sorts of situations involving assertion, but then one has to explain why role-play assertion does not correlate with the other written measures. In any event, these data indicate that assertion is a complex construct in which the role of task and situational factors are not well understood.

In doing research with men held in maximum security, one must always worry about whether the results will be contaminated by the subjects attempting to favorably impress the researchers. This concern is not adequately addressed by promising confidentiality. This issue is of most concern with an instrument such as the PSQ where the subjects would ordinarily not want to indicate that they might harm someone. The results of the present study are not, however, explainable by this type of bias. With respect to the PSQ, there is no obvious reason why high *O-H* subjects should attempt to look better than low *O-H* subjects as all were charged with similar offenses and were being held under similar conditions. With regard to the behavioral role-play data, it is difficult to contend that subjects would attempt to "look good" by cleaning up instead of watching TV or watching a stranger's luggage instead of catching their bus. Differential efforts to "look good" among the subject groups on the behavioral measures are even less plausible.

#### Reference Note

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