Reviewer's report

Title: Full title: Learning aptitude, spatial orientation and cognitive flexibility tested in a virtual labyrinth after virtual stress induction

Version: 2 Date: 6 February 2015

Reviewer: Emanuele Antonio Maria AM Cappella

Reviewer's report:

1) Minor essential revisions.

I think that this article needs a good English revision. There are in my view some sentences that do not sound natural in English. By way of example, line 17: "Farhadbeigia stated that it has been unsolved, to which degree different levels of stress impair accuracy in decisions". I think it will be better to change the sentence in something like "F. stated that the degree to which different levels of stress impair accuracy in decisions is currently unclear.".

Another example from line 22: "... how researchers induced stress (therefore it is one of the aims of the study to create a standardized way for stress induction)". I would suggest "... how researchers induced stress. Therefore, our study aims at providing a standardized way for stress induction".

I found even some grammatical inaccuracies:
- line 9 pag 3: "is that both stress induction AND (not as well as) cognitive..."
- line 20 pag 5: "Collectively" should be changed in "Taken together".

2) Discretionary revisions

- Table 1: Standard Deviations should be reported.
- Descriptives: you should describe more thoroughly your participants. Education/Employment? Ethnicity? You should also report the standard deviation value for Age.
- Limitations: I don't see this section...

3) Major compulsory revisions

- The major problem is the reliability of the items measuring stress. This is very important because all your analysis (and consequently your conclusions) are based only on this measure. Why did you choose three simple questions instead of one already validated instrument? It is of course possible to create a new stress index, but in this case its reliability should be explored and reported. It is therefore of paramount importance to report at least the Cronbach's Alpha to show the consistency of the items used. Another solution would be to repeat the study taking into account reliability with new participants/ a new stress measure.
Validity. We don't know anything about the convergent and discriminant validity of the instrument used to test the hypotheses. As for content validity I personally don't think that your items capture the complexity of the stress construct. I think it is important to specify in the article which model lead you in the construction of the items, preferably with some literature references.

Without taking into account reliability and validity we cannot draw any certain conclusion. In fact, you assume that your version of TSST induced stress (hypothesis 1) only on the basis of the results provided by your items - which as I said are not psychometrically sound. I think that a possible solution in this case would be to add some physiological data (cortisol, heart rate...). On the one hand this would support your first conclusion; on the other hand such addition would allow to evaluate the validity of your stress index. By the way, I found some studies that provide such measures to support their conclusions about the same virtual reality test (a slightly different versions of the Trier Social Stress Test, see Jonsson et al. 2010).

The same line of reasoning applies to hypothesis 2 and 3: how can you test the effect of stress induced by TSST on spatial orientation and cognitive flexibility if you don't show that you are adequately measuring stress with your items (validity) and that they are reasonably consistent (reliability)?

To sum it up, I think that there is a serious issue of psychometric soundness, which needs to be addressed.

Level of interest: An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

Quality of written English: Needs some language corrections before being published

Statistical review: Yes, and I have assessed the statistics in my report.

Declaration of competing interests: I declare that I have no competing interests