False Confessions; Their Internal and External Factors

By

Brooke Cervoni

B.S Psychology: Forensic

For

Dr. Gretchen Sechrist

Mansfield University
Abstract

False confessions are more present, however, than most people assume them to be; with about
16% of cases involving a false admission. Lying to an investigator about a crime one did not
commit is a rather counterintuitive thing to do, so why do individuals do it? This research
examines the three different types of false confessions that can be elicited: coerced-complaint,
coerced-internalized, and voluntary. Not only that but internal (including mental capacity,
vulnerability to confusion, previous victimization, and psychological disorders) and external
(such as the interrogation process, environment, and investigator attitude) factors influencing
false confessions are also discussed.
False Confessions; Their Internal and External Causes

False confessions are a topic present in both the psychology world and the criminal justice world that can be defined as an instance when an individual who is being interviewed or interrogated for a crime, admits to committing a crime that was not done by that individual. Confessions in general are a very powerful thing to have in a court, no matter whether it is accurate or not (Kassin, 2015). Investigators are found typically to only focus on one thing when entering an interrogation; to get a confession; whether it is entirely true or not. As a matter of fact, as many of 16% of cases where a confession was present, turned out the confessions were false; this was determined by DNA evidence (Cutler, 2014). False confessions can be drawn from individuals because of this attitude, therefore meaning that some false confessions are given not voluntary, but coerced (Kassin, 2015).

This leads to the idea that Kavanaugh (2016) presented, that there are three different types of false confessions that an individual can elicit; coerced-compliant, coerced-internalized, and voluntary. Two out of these three types are one that are commonly given by subjects after some level of police persuasion or coercion. This coercion creates psychological pressure on an individual for various reasons that causes them to admit to an investigator a crime that person may not have done. Certain individuals tend to have copious amounts of social influence on others, depending on their title (Kassin, 2015).

False confessions are frankly a very counterintuitive topic; as most subjects typically do what ever possible to defend themselves rather than flat out confessing to a crime. Therefore, falsely confessing to something simply goes against what it is out intuition to do (Kassin, 2015). There can be many psychological reasons as to why someone might confess to something that was not true; reasons such as fear, dissociation, shock, or suggestion (Kassin, 2017). However, a
big influential factor comes from the interrogation process and the persuasion that may come along with it.

There are two types of interrogation, minimization and maximization as Narchet, Meissner, & Russano (2011) state; both involve different levels of persuasion and pressure. Minimum techniques are usually the type of tactics that are the less aggressive and gentler, which provide less persuasion or suggestion of the individual. Of course, maximum style is the exact opposite, demonstrating rather aggressive techniques during the interrogation and involve copious amounts of coercion and persuasion (Narchet, Meissner, & Russano, 2011). Factors such as social influence and behavioral confirmation tend to be very prevalent within most interrogations; more present, however, in interrogations that use the maximization style.

Overall, which factors are more likely to cause someone to falsely confess? The internal factors such as the vulnerability to social pressures, or external factors such as the interrogation environment.

**Internal Factors**

An individual’s personality traits when being questioned in an interrogation setting can play a part and influence the vulnerability to give a false admission. Each type of false confession comes from different psychological issues but overall, concepts such as low IQ, psychological disorders like bipolar, and even low self-esteem increase the vulnerability (Drake, 2017). As Redlich, Summers, and Hoover (2010) state, with mental impairment, symptom severity amongst individuals increases the likelihood of confusion leading to the increase in false admissions. Other factors include substance abuse of any kind, as well as age.
Gudjonsson, Sigurdsson, Sigfusdottir, Asgeirsdottir, & Young (2016) showed this age factor in a study they completed. The researcher comprised a sample of over 22,000 juvenile participants. Each participant was given a detail questionnaire regarding multiple factors in their lives, such as family past and potential hyperactivity or ADHD. Other questions included previous offending behavior and if they had any previous experience being questioned by police. The results showed that out of the entire sample of juveniles, about 2,900 had previous experience being questioned in an interrogation environment. Researchers concluded that almost 60% of those juveniles had claimed to given a false confession at one time or another, also concluded that the younger the juvenile the more likely they are to falsely confess (Gudjonsson, Sigurdsson, Sigfusdottir, Asgeirsdottir, & Young, 2016).

Coerced-Compliant Confessions

Coerced-Compliant confessions are confessions given by a subject when they are completely aware the confession given is false, however they lie in order to avoid or stop police persuasion or highly coercive tactics (Kavanaugh, 2016). This type of confession seems to be the most prevalent simply because police in the interrogation environment tend to have a large influence on individuals. An example of this, as stated by Kavanaugh (2016), took place in Chicago in 1985. A man by the name of Lavelle Burt gave investigators a false confession, stating he was responsible for a murder for the sole reason that he was promised probation rather than prison if he were to confess.

Police persuasion can be highly effective on almost anyone, however some individual tends to be more vulnerable to the tactics used by investigations in an interrogation. A coerced-compliant confession is typically given after copious amounts of psychological pressure is placed
on a subject, and subjects who show low executive functioning and problems such as mental illness and low IQ are the most vulnerable to these pressures (Kavanaugh, 2016).

A study conducted by Redlich, Kulish, and Steadman (2011) designed to look at false and true confessions, examined sixty-five prisoners in which over half of the studied population stated they had falsely confessed to the charge that got them convicted. All participants in the study had a previous diagnosis of mental illness; disorders such as schizophrenia, bipolar, and depression were all present (Redlich et al., 2011). These researchers used standard interview questions with the participants in order to determine who had falsely confessed and who had not. Questions regarding interrogation time and perception of possible evidence against the subject were also present in these preliminary interviews (Redlich et al., 2011). In addition, participants were also questioned as to why they falsely confessed. The study concluded overall based on the crimes committed by the offenders along with the different interrogation aspects, and whether the individual stated they either truly or falsely confessed, false confessions were produced more often in longer interrogations than true confessions. The aspect of length of time is rather important because it shows that the amount of time a person is repeatedly questioned about a crime, can create enough psychological pressure on an individual to get them to falsely confess to a crime.

Mental illness is a big internal factor that is present quite often amongst individuals who have falsely confessed, which like stated beforehand, is also a factor that can influence a coerced-compliant false confession. People who present some form of mental illness tend to be individuals who cycle through the criminal justice system quite often (Redlich, Summers, & Hoover, 2010). These individuals are more prone to confusion, and like stated beforehand, are more prone to take plea deals and react to persuasion because mental illness typically causes a
lack of assertiveness which makes persuasion on the investigative end rather easy (Redlich et al., 2010). The combination between the vulnerability and the frequency of being in and out of the system causes the presence of false admissions to increase amongst mentally ill offenders.

Being in a long interrogation along with the lack of assertiveness makes mentally ill offenders more prone to give a coerced-compliant false admission in an investigation. Not only that but most mentally ill offenders also tend to live close to the poverty line, therefore they give a false admission if promised probation or another deal of some sort, simply because they cannot afford bail (Redlich et al., 2010). A similar study, conducted by Redlich and colleagues (2010), to the previous one also studied the topic of mentally ill offenders and the prevalence of false confessions amongst them. Researchers took 1,249 individuals within the criminal justice system who presented mental illness. Quite similar to the previous study with false confessions in mentally ill offenders, most information came from an in-person interview with specific questions (Redlich et. al, 2010). These researchers categorized the participants into different categories based on their mental diagnoses; schizo-spectrum and psychotic disorders, bipolar disorders, depressive disorders, and other disorders.

Questions in the interview were presented in a fashion that was very straight forward and easy for participants to understand. Questions primarily included ones that would only elicit a yes or no response regarding whether the person has previously given a false admission during questioning (Redlich et. al, 2010). The frequency of arrests for these individuals and the aspect of guilty pleas was also taken into consideration and was apart of the presented study. The findings of this study present firstly that there was a high correlation between those that gave a false confession and those that gave a false guilty plea (84%). All in all, 844 participants out of the 1,249 claimed to have given a false admission of guilt. The findings of this study are
important because it shows there is a high rate of mentally ill offenders who lie to investigators when being questioned. 56% of the individuals questioned made statements regarding the fact that they solely falsely confessed in order to be allowed to leave or avoid continuation of questioning (Redlich et. al, 2010). This study confirms the idea that some individuals present an investigator with a coerced-compliant confessions simply because they desire to get out of the situation they are in.

**Coerced-Internalized Confessions**

Rather than lying to avoid coercion, individuals who give a coerced-internalized confession are subjects who truly believe the false statements that may be given by investigators causing them to truly believe they committed a crime they, as a matter of fact, did not (Kavanaugh, 2016). These confessions are a major result of suggestibility and the false evidence along with the pressure from investigators that create false memories. Mastroberardino & Marucci (2013) suggest that interrogative suggestibility is the result of an interrogation that is essentially one on one interaction between subject and interrogator. Questions create suggestibility by involving subliminal messages along with investigators behavior that sways the subject to state certain information (Mastroberardino et. al, 2013). Often times, an investigator might give false information such as fake evidence that makes the individual believe they did it.

Mastroberardino and colleagues (2013) conducted a study where participants were shown a video clip of an incident, such as a car accident. Afterwards participants were asked various questions by researchers about the incident they had witnessed. Throughout the questioning, researchers casually and subtly gave participants incorrect information regarding what happened. When asked later about what transpired during the video, participants have responses that involved the false information previously presented by the researchers. This shows that
investigators have the ability to suggest to a subject that something occurred when it may not have. When an investigator presents someone will false information, the person more than likely will believe it causing them to not be able to subsequently recall what actually had happened (Mastroberardino et al., 2013). According to the empirical evidence on suggestibility, there is a high correlation with suggestibility and the need to please others who seem superior to you. This can be entirely related to the Milgram experiment that took place in 1974, suggestibility in interrogations also shows obedience to individuals with power; obedience is a coping mechanism many subconsciously use when facing interpersonal conflict that tends to be present in an interrogation setting (Mastroberardino et al., 2013).

This suggestibility within questioning therefore can cause subjects to actually create false memories which then leads to that individual entirely believing the crime was committed by them. A study conducted by Kersten and Earles (2017) investigated the correlation between viewing offender’s mugshots before being read a scenario, and the elicitation of a false memory. Experimenters used both younger adults and older adults to gather the empirical evidence. Participants tested on event recognition by being shown videos that involved actors completing simple tasks such as watering a plant. Mugshots of each individual present in the videos was thereafter shown to participants, who were then asked to identify which actor completed the task they were asked about (Kersten et al., 2017). Halfway through the experiment, researchers began implementing mugshots of subjects who were not seen in the previous videos. The results of this study showed that older adults were more likely to create false memories based on the mugshots and correlating them to the wrong action when compared to the younger adults. Kersten and Earles (2017) mention that leading questions that were given to participants therefore lead to the subject creating that association as a memory. This information is rather important because it
shows that slight suggestibility from a researcher or investigator can easily cause a subject to create a false association believing something took place when it did not. This is one of the primary reasons as to why coerced-internalized confessions exist.

There are three major factors that can be associated with influencing coerced-internalized confessions; behavioral confirmation, source monitoring framework, and psychological coercion. Like stated, a coerced-internalized confession is when an individual truly believes they committed the crime in question. These factors can influence an individual’s mindset into them believing things they are being told.

**Behavioral Confirmation.** Other than suggestibility, there are other factors that play into someone giving a coerced-internalized confession; an altered state of consciousness such as intoxication and investigators primary attitude can also affect and individual. Behavioral confirmation is when a person’s social expectation on another determines how that person will act toward an individual ultimately confirming the original beliefs (Narchet et al., 2011). Interrogators can potentially enter an interrogation with a preconceived idea that the subject is guilty, therefore treating them as if they are causing them to believe they are guilty. Narchet and colleagues (2011) state that when investigators enter with a guilty mind, they tend to only pay attention to behavioral or verbal cues that confirm their beliefs. When an interrogation enters with a guilty mind, it is highly unlikely they will take no as an answer, this is what relates back to suggestibility (Chapman, 2013).

**Source monitoring framework.** Most individuals can differentiate real memories from imagination; but some cannot. For some, this makes false confessions an easy thing to obtain because they confuse what really happened and what they imagined happening, as Chapman (2013) stated. These individuals struggle with the entire memory process; encoding and
retrieving. Lindsay and Johnson (2000) state that source monitoring framework sometimes these imaginative memories can come from past experiences, which causes even further confusion. Sometimes this framework is done subconsciously, as seen in coerced-internalized confession circumstances.

**Psychological Coercion.** Similar to suggestibility, psychological coercion is the result of various police techniques on a subject whilst being questioned. Chapman (2013) mentions how this coercion is an actual manipulation of the subject’s memory, causing them to remember something incorrectly; moving them to denial to false admission. Interrogations themselves are a huge stressor for individuals which automatically makes them more susceptible for police persuasion.

**Voluntary Confessions**

This type of confession stems from a subject who is aware they did not commit the crime but states they did so anyway and is very aware that the statements they are making are false. A well-known case that can be applied to this type of confession is the case of JonBenet Ramsey (Kavanaugh, 2016). Many years after the murder of this little girl, a man by the name of Mark Karr voluntarily came forward stating he was responsible. However, at the end of a complete investigation, it was concluded that Karr DNA evidence did not match the evidence in the Ramsey case. Kavanaugh (2016) mentions that often times individuals will give a voluntary false confession to someone other than the police; a therapist or friend for example.

There is little empirical evidence based on voluntary false confessions and why some people give them. However, Kavanaugh (2016) explains there seems to be a few solidified explanations for voluntary, or spontaneous false admissions of guilt. Firstly, a subject who is
willing to lie to investigators about a crime they did not commit may simply not understand that serious consequences may arise from them doing so. Innocent individuals have spent decades in prison before DNA exonerates them, because they voluntarily confessed to something they did not do. Many believe that if they lie DNA will just surface to prove that wrong, however that is clearly not always applicable. Lack of appreciation for the criminal justice system paired with the lack of understanding for consequences is a good explanation as to why the population that voluntarily falsely confesses the most often are juveniles. Juveniles tend to be rather impulsive and are simply psychosocially too immature causing them the lack of understanding (Kavanaugh, 2016).

Another more prevalent reason is the idea that many aspire to be known, to gain some sort of notoriety for something (Kavanaugh, 2016). Sometimes there are individual who are obsessed with themselves who may possess something like narcissistic personality disorder. Narcissistic personality disorder is a psychological disorder that is prevalent in about 6% of the population (Ronningstam, 2016). Subjects with narcissistic personality disorder tend to be highly focused and preoccupied with themselves and typically lack empathy for other individuals. These individuals are rather negative toward others as well as lacking the ability to engage with others, as Ronningstam (2016) states. Having narcissistic personality disorder can lead someone to voluntarily admit to guilt when they are not guilt, because they are so preoccupied with how they appear to others. If they believe that being responsible for a certain crime will make them look good to others, or give them fame of some kind, they are more likely to commit to the false confession.

Others who are intending to protect another individual from a crime may also lie to investigators giving a false confession. Gudjonsson, Sigurdsson, and Sigfusdottir (2010) discuss
how people who have been previously victimized in their lives, by bullies for example, are more likely to falsely confess to protect someone else. This suggests that there is a correlation between people who were bullied falsely confessing to protect that bully. A study conducted by Gudjonsson and colleagues (2010) examined the prevalence of false confessions between bullies and victims. Bullying is something that occurs not only in childhood in school, but other environments as well such as work or prison. Researchers hypothesized that those who are both a bully and previous victim are most likely to submit to giving a false admission. What researchers found affirmed their hypothesis, finding that bully-victims are interrogation and have experience with police more than just bullies, or just victims. The findings of this study are important because the conclusions are rather interesting. Gudjonsson and colleagues (2010) suggest that previous bullies may be more apt to give a false admission due to previous guilt about their acts.

**External Factors: Investigator Bias**

With each type of false confession there are external factors associated with it that influence the confession, such as room size and lighting. However, the external factor that is most influential and prevalent is investigator bias. This concept was slightly touched on earlier; it is the effect an investigator has on an individual while going onto a questioning. Meaning, if an investigator walks into an interrogation with a guilty mind, perceiving beforehand that the subject is guilty, it causes them to believe they might be (Narchet et. al, 2011). If an officer is questioning a subject and believes they are guilty, it will cause them to treat the subject as if they are guilty, therefore ultimately causing the subject to have guilt mannerisms.

**Bluff Technique.** This technique is used by investigators by telling subjects there may be solid evidence against them, when there is not (Perrillo & Kassin, 2011). This technique scares subjects into believing they have been caught so they sometimes jump right into a confession.
Investigators do things such as telling a subject there was a witness who told them everything, or that there was biological evidence of some kind found.

As Perrillo and colleague (2011) state, this technique causing individuals to become more incented to cooperate with whatever investigators might say; further leading them to confess. Perrillo (2011) goes on to elaborate on the idea that the bluff technique should not influence a completely innocent subject whatsoever because that subject should be more than aware that there is not actual evidence against them. This technique can alter some subjects thinking and beliefs so much that they confess.

Perrillo and Kassin (2011) conducted a study involving seventy-nine psychology students where the bluff technique was experimented. The subjects were told to complete a computer program but were given explicit instructions not to press the ALT key on the keyboard because that might cause the computer to crash. After about a minute of the participants completing the computer program, the computer began eliciting loud beeping noises. This is when the researchers began to accuse the subjects of pressing the ALT key. Some participants were also presented with false incriminating evidence further making them believe they might have hit the key. Other participants were given the bluff technique where they were told the computer was connected to a server in another room where everything the participants did was being monitored. As a result, over half the participants (60.6%), after being given either false evidence or the bluff technique, confessed to pressing the ALT key when they did not, another 9.9% stated they believed they had did it but did not verbally confess to it (Perrillo & Kassin, 2011). This study affirms that presenting an individual with false information or lying about what evidence might be available against them transpires to them believing that they might have done what they are being accused of, causing a false confession.
Alternative Perspective

The psychology field has very different ideas than the criminal justice field when it comes to false confessions. Officers and individuals in similar fields believe that false confessions are rare and do not occur as often as some believe they do. This idea mainly stems from the Reid Technique, which contains specific steps investigators follow to retrieve a confession (Klein, 2016).

The Reid Technique was developed in the 1940s by John E. Reid. The purpose of this technique is to essentially conduct an interrogation the correct way as well as identify possible behaviors in a subject that may be deceptive of any kind. A Behavioral Symptom Analysis (BSA) or Behavior Analysis Interview (BAI) is something that is very important in the Reid Technique, which is also why most believe false confessions do not happen. It is believed by some in the criminal justice field that truthful subject and deceptive subjects show dramatically different behaviors, both verbally and nonverbally, which is found by doing a BSA or BAI; techniques that evaluate subject’s behavior to determine whether it is deceptive or not (Klein, 2016). After establishing a baseline of behaviors for every individual, after asking specific behavior provoking questions, an investigator believes they can then tell whether the truth is being told or not.

The entire purpose of an interrogation is to get a confession, and officers believe that by using this technique, no confessions is a false one. Simply because behavior is evaluated per subject allowing them to determine what behaviors are false and what are not. Klein (2016) even states in his article that the creator of the technique denies the fact that the technique is not used to simply get to a confession, stating it is used to result in the truth. Other than that, during the Reid Technique, the interrogators develop themes while questioning a suspect. This means they
develop questions around the crime the subject has supposedly committed. Most of these themes involves statements that sympathize with the person in question (Klien, 2016). This sympathy diminishes any feelings of guilt an individual may have, essentially tricking them into confessing.

The Reid Technique is specific in training investigators the differences between innocent subjects and guilty subjects, however there are also things that are quite often looked over (Klein, 2016). Often times they are told to brush past objections of any kind and continue the questioning affirming to the subject that the interrogator believes they are guilty.

Overall, however, the Reid Technique teaches a step by step way to give subjects an interrogation properly. There are specific requirements an investigator must complete while giving an interrogation, along with analyzed subject behavior. Most believe there is a true difference between false and true behavioral acts, therefore affirming the believes that with the Reid Technique, no false confession is a wrong one.

All in all, based on what the Reid Technique provides, some think that there is no way a false confession exists because the deceptive behavior is being analyzed throughout questioning. While statistics may show that false confessions are prevalent (16%) according to DNA exonerations, those who believe in the Reid Technique attest to the fact that they are able to determine the difference between truth and deception.

Conclusion

What has a bigger influence on whether someone falsely confesses, internal factors or external factors? Overall, based in the findings presented in the studies, while internal factors have the ability to have a large influence on people, external factors sometimes have an even
bigger influence. The persuasion during police interrogation ultimately causes extreme psychological pressure on a subject; sometimes even those without mental impairments.

Often times a police officer may contaminate an interrogation by unintentionally leading a subject information about the case or case facts giving them details to work with (Garret, 2010). So for some false confessions, they would have never been given if police did not feed them information to begin with. That combined with police persuasion in certain circumstances can create the perfect recipe to for a subject to give a false admission of guilt; as stated before two out of the three types of false confessions are a direct result of police persuasion.
References


FALSE CONFESSIONS; THE EXTERNAL AND INTERNAL CAUSES

By: Brooke Cervoni
Outline

• What is a false confession?
• Types of False Confessions
  – Coerced-Compliant Confessions
  – Coerced-Internalized Confessions
  – Voluntary or Spontaneous Confessions
• Internal Factors
• External Factors
• Alternative Perspective
• Conclusion
What is a False Confession?

- Admitting to a crime one did not commit
- About 16% of cases involving a confession, the confession is false
  - (Cutler, 2014)
- They are a powerful piece of evidence in court, even if the confession is false
- Typically involve some level of police persuasion
- There are three different types of false confessions with many factors that influence them
Research Question

- Which factors can influence a false confession more, internal factors or external factors?
Coerced-Compliant Confessions

- Person confessing is aware they are lying, but lie to avoid persuasion
- Copious amounts of psychological pressure involved
- Length of time in interrogation is highly influential
  - Redlich, Kulish, and Streadman (2011)
Coerced-Internalized Confessions

- False confessions given when the person truly believes they are the one who committed the crime
- Involves a lot of suggestibility
- Subtle questions that involve suggestibility can highly influence a person's memory
  - Mastroberardino & Marucci (2013)
- Obedience to individuals in power
  - Milgram experiment 1974
Coerced-Internalized Confessions

- False memories can be created
  - Mugshot study, Kersten & Earles (2017)
- Behavioral Confirmation
  - Treating someone a specific way causing them to act a specific way
Voluntary Confessions

- No police persuasion involved here
- The subject knows they did not commit the crime but says they did anyway
  - JonBenet Ramsey case
- To gain fame or notoriety, lack of appreciation of the CJ system.
- Narcissistic Personality Disorder
Previous Victimization in Juveniles

- Previous victims are more prone to voluntary false confessions
  - Gudjonsson, Sigurdsson, & Sigfusdottir (2010), even found previous bullies are more vulnerable
Previous Victimization

Gudjonsson, Sigurdsson, Sigfusdottir, Asgeirsdottir, & Young (2016)

The Rate of False Confessions for Bullying

- Pure Bullies
- Pure Victims
- Bully-Victims
- Neither

The Rate of False Confessions for Bullying

In percentage
Internal Factors

• Personality traits have a big impact
  – Low IQ
  – Psychological disorders like bipolar
  – Low self-esteem

• Mental impairment
External Factors

- Environment effect confessions
  - Small room, poor lighting, uncomfortable chairs, lack of food or water

- Investigator Bias
  - Guilty Mindset of investigator causes guilty behavior; behavioral confirmation

- Bluff technique
  - Lying about evidence or exaggerating evidence
  - Perrillo & Kassin (2011), ALT key study
Bluff Technique

Perrillo & Kassin (2011)

Confessions in Percentage

Verbally Falsely Confessed
Internally Falsely Confessed
Did Not Confess
Alternative Perspective

- Many think false confessions do not occur as often as they do
- Reid Technique
  - Developed in the late 40’s
  - Step by step technique on how to conduct an interrogation
  - Also teaches Behavioral Symptom Analysis which evaluates deceptive behavior, which is why most think false confessions don’t exist
Conclusion

• Which factors have a greater influence on false confessions; external or internal

• Each type of confession involves both, but only two involve police persuasion

• All in all, external factors seem to influence internal factors leading to false confessions

• Recommendation:
  – Improvements to the Reid Technique
QUESTIONS?