



False Confessions and the Impact of Psychological Coercion: Insights from Forensic Psychology

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DESCRIPTION

In the area of criminal justice, few concepts are as troubling as the occurrence of false confessions. These confessions, often given by innocent individuals, have led to wrongful convictions, public distrust and the erosion of confidence in investigative methods. While the phenomenon is well-documented, it is the psychological coercion that underpins many of these false confessions that has become a focal point in forensic psychology. Understanding the complexities of how psychological pressure affects individuals during interrogation is critical not only for improving interrogation practices but also for safeguarding the rights of suspects.

False confessions are often not a result of malicious intent by the suspect but are instead a product of intense psychological manipulation during interrogation. The methods used by law enforcement can be subtle yet immensely powerful. Forensic psychology offers essential insights into how tactics such as prolonged questioning, threats and the minimization of the crime can lead an innocent person to falsely admit guilt.

One of the key factors in understanding false confessions is the concept of coercive persuasion. This refers to techniques used to convince an individual that they are guilty of a crime, despite being innocent. For instance, the use of isolation, sleep deprivation and the presentation of fabricated evidence can induce a state of confusion and distress in a suspect. In such conditions, individuals may begin to question their own memories or reasoning, becoming more susceptible to suggestions made by interrogators. In a state of psychological duress, the desire to escape the interrogation may outweigh the fear of confessing to a crime one did not commit.

Interrogation techniques vary widely, but research has shown that certain approaches are more likely to elicit false confessions. One of the most notorious methods is the Reid Technique, which involves both psychological manipulation and tactical pressure. This method often includes presenting false evidence, offering leniency for a confession and making the suspect feel

that admitting guilt is the only way out. The Reid Technique is widely criticized for its potential to induce false confessions, as it allows for a high degree of psychological manipulation without proper safeguards for the rights of the suspect.

Another technique commonly employed is the good cop/bad cop routine, where one interrogator acts aggressively, while another offers sympathy and promises of leniency in exchange for a confession. This contrast can lead to a breakdown in the suspect's defenses and create a false sense of safety when agreeing to confess, often without fully understanding the legal ramifications.

Certain individuals are more vulnerable to psychological coercion than others. Forensic psychology highlights that juveniles, individuals with intellectual disabilities and those suffering from mental health disorders are especially susceptible to false confessions. Studies have shown that younger individuals or those with lower cognitive functioning may lack the ability to effectively evaluate the consequences of their actions during interrogations. Furthermore, a sense of powerlessness or fear of more severe punishment can prompt them to comply with the demands of interrogators, even if it means admitting to a crime they did not commit.

These vulnerable groups are at a heightened risk of giving false confessions, making it all the more important for forensic professionals to advocate for interrogation practices that are fair, ethical and respectful of the rights of suspects. The implementation of legal safeguards, such as ensuring the presence of legal counsel during interrogations and recording all interrogations, can help mitigate the risk of false confessions.

The consequences of false confessions are far-reaching. Aside from the immediate damage to an individual's life, including wrongful conviction and imprisonment, the broader implications affect the integrity of the justice system. False confessions undermine public trust in law enforcement and the criminal justice process. They contribute to the wrongful conviction of innocent individuals, which can result in the real

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Received: 29-Nov-2024, Manuscript No. JFPY-24-28204; **Editor assigned:** 02-Dec-2024, PreQC No. JFPY-24-28204 (PQ); **Reviewed:** 16-Dec-2024, QC No. JFPY-24-282040; **Revised:** 23-Dec-2024, Manuscript No. JFPY-24-28204 (R); **Published:** 30-Dec-2024, DOI: 10.35248/2475-319X.24.9.365

Citation: Garcia I (2024). False Confessions and the Impact of Psychological Coercion: Insights from Forensic Psychology. J Foren Psy. 9:365.

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perpetrators remaining free, continuing to pose a threat to public safety.

Moreover, false confessions often result in prolonged legal battles and can hinder the search for the true perpetrators. Forensic psychology underscores that the failure to properly assess the psychological state of a suspect during interrogation can lead to the erosion of justice, further perpetuating a cycle of harm.

CONCLUSION

False confessions, primarily driven by psychological coercion, highlight the need for reform in interrogation practices.

Forensic psychology provides vital insights into how manipulation can break down an individual's will and lead them to admit to crimes they did not commit. As we continue to refine the criminal justice system, it is essential to implement safeguards that protect individuals from psychological pressure, ensure fair treatment during interrogations and ultimately uphold the principles of justice. A commitment to ethical interrogation techniques is not only a moral imperative but also an important step in preventing wrongful convictions and preserving public trust in the legal system.