

The Psychological Impact of False Confession in Criminal Investigations

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ABSTRACT:

This present study aims to examine the psychological impact of false confession in criminal investigation with the help of five well known criminal cases. A qualitative research design and case study method was used and the secondary data were collected from the legal records , documentaries , court documents and published research. The findings revealed five major psychological consequences associated with false confessions and wrongful convictions: erosion of personal reality, psychological dependency on authority, identity reconstruction after exoneration, chronic need for self-justification, and loss of psychological safety. These findings suggest that the impact of false confessions extends beyond immediate emotional distress and can significantly affect an individual's sense of self, trust in authority, perception of reality, and overall psychological well-being. The study highlights the importance of understanding false confessions not only as legal failures but also as experiences with profound and long-lasting psychological consequences. The findings contribute to forensic psychology by providing deeper insight into the lived experiences of wrongfully convicted individuals and emphasizing the need for psychologically informed criminal justice practices.

INTRODUCTION

Confessions are often considered one of the strongest forms of evidence in criminal investigations. When a person admits to committing a crime then the investigators , courts and the public assume the confession to be truthful. As a result , confessions play an important role in determining guilt and also influences legal decisions. However , research in forensic psychology has shown that not all confessions are genuine. In some cases , innocent individuals may confess to the crime that they did not commit.

False confessions have become an important area of study because they have contributed to several wrongful convictions around the world. Psychological research suggests that various factors such as fear , suggestibility , stress , emotional vulnerability and the pressure from authority figures can influence individuals into providing inaccurate or false statements. In some situations , innocent individuals may confess in order to escape stressful circumstances or because they doubt their own memories.

In the published research by Richard A. Leo (2009) titled "false confessions : causes , consequences and implications" , this research breaks down how false confessions happen through the chain of three interconnected mistakes and it starts with misclassification , this is the moment where the police decide that a particular person is guilty and it is often wrong then the second mistake kicks in which is coercion. In the second mistake , it explains that modern police interrogations are designed to be deeply uncomfortable , the suspect is isolated and accused repeatedly and also are told that the evidence against them is overwhelming and are pressured to see confession as their only way out. After hours or even days of this relentless pressure, combined with exhaustion , fear and the feeling that no one will ever believe

them anyway, some innocent people break and they confess that they did it because confession feels like the only door left open.

Moving to the third mistake which is unsettling and it's called contamination. A confession isn't just 'i did it', it also includes a detailed story about how and why the crime happened and clearly, an innocent person wouldn't naturally know the details but during interrogation, police often feed suspects specific parts of the crime. By the time, the suspects recount the crime in their own words and the story sounds accurate and not because the person did it but because the details were slowly transferred to them during the interrogation process itself and that's what makes false confession dangerous.

In the same paper, it also explores what kind of people are most likely to break under this kind of pressure and it shows people with developmental disabilities are particularly vulnerable because they want to please authority figures and may not fully understand what they are agreeing to or what the long term consequences are. Teenagers are at high risk too because they tend to be impulsive and more trusting of adults and finally, the people with mental illness are also disproportionately likely to give false confessions as they may struggle with anxiety, distorted thinking or have difficulty in distinguishing between what is real and what is not real. It was found that more than 70% of documented false confessions came from mentally healthy adults and it shows that it can happen to anyone under the right or wrong conditions.

Leo distinguishes between three psychologically different types of false confessions. First being Voluntary, where someone comes forward on their own and confesses to the crime out of the desire for fame or sometimes to protect the real perpetrator and also sometimes due to genuine psychiatric disturbances that blurs the line between fantasy and reality. High profile crimes historically attract dozens or even hundreds of these of confession, Second being compliant, which is common where the person knows that they are innocent but the interrogation has become so unbearable that they confess just to make it stop and lastly, the most psychologically disturbing type is the persuaded one where the interrogation is so intense and prolonged that the suspect actually starts to doubt their own memory and they begin to wonder if maybe that they actually did it or simply can't remember.

Finally, the consequences of false confession are devastating and once a confession exists then it acts like a gravity field that pulls everything else in the case towards convictions and the police stops investigating other leads and the prosecutor charges aggressively and also the defense attorneys pressure their clients into plea deals and the judges rarely throw a confession out. Studies have found that false confessors who went on trial and were convicted between 73% and 81% of time.

LITERATURE REVIEW:

Researchers have been studying false confessions for many years because confessions are considered to be the strongest form of evidence in criminal investigations. However, studies have shown that sometimes people confess to a crime that they did not commit.

A research by Kaasin and Gudjonsson (2004) explored the psychology behind confessions and found that false confessions are not rare events and the review showed factors like interrogation pressure, suggestibility and psychological vulnerability can influence innocent individuals into making false statements and also emphasised that confessions can be highly persuasive and may contribute to wrongful conviction even the other evidence is weak.

Building on this understanding, Gudjonsson (2003) examined the psychology of interrogations and confessions in great detail and he found that certain people are more vulnerable during questioning because

of factors such as compliance , stress , suggestibility and emotional distress. His work showed that lengthy interrogation and pressure from the authority figures can increase the likelihood of false confessions and this study highlighted that not everyone who responds to interrogation in the same way and that psychological vulnerabilities play an important role in confession related cases.

Moving on , Kassin (2017) further explored the causes and consequences of false confessions and the findings showed that innocent individuals may confess because of fear , stress , exhaustion or a desire to escape a difficult situation. The study also pointed out that once a confession is obtained , investigators and jurors often view it as strong evidence, making it difficult to challenge even when the confession is false. This demonstrated how false confessions can have serious consequences and lead to wrongful convictions.

More recently , Gudjonsson (2021) focused on understanding how false confessions lead to wrongful convictions. He explained that mistakes often begin with investigators focusing on a suspect too early, which was followed by aggressive questioning and the influence of misleading information during interrogations. His findings suggested that wrongful convictions are not caused by a single factor but rather by the interaction of several psychological and situational factors. This research emphasized the importance of understanding the pathways that lead innocent individuals to confess.

Otgaar , Howe , Merckelbach and Muris (2021) examined the relationship between suggestibility , compliance and false confessions and the study found that individuals who are highly suggestible or compliant may be more vulnerable to accepting information provided by others and may even begin to doubt their own memories. The researchers suggested that these psychological characteristics can increase the risk of false confessions especially when individuals are placed under stressful or pressured circumstances.

Together , these studies show that false confessions are influenced by a combination of psychological and situational factors. The existing literature also suggests that false confessions are closely linked to wrongful convictions and that understanding these factors is important for improving criminal interrogations and preventing miscarriage of justice. These findings provide the foundation for the present study which aims to examine the psychological impact of false confessions through the analysis of selected criminal cases.

METHODOLOGY:

The present study adopts a qualitative research method to examine the psychological impact of false confessions in a criminal investigation. A qualitative method was considered to be appropriate because the study aims to explore the emotional and psychological experiences of individuals affected by false confessions rather than focusing on the numerical data or statistical analysis. The study primarily focused on understanding how false confessions influenced the thoughts , emotions, self perception and overall psychological well being of the individuals involved.

This study uses a case study method to gain a deeper understanding of the psychological consequences of false confessions. In this study , there are five case studies which were used to gain that deeper understanding and this method was considered to be suitable because it helped to connect psychological concepts with the lived experiences of the individuals involved. For the data analysis, the collected information was analysed using thematic analysis and this method involved identifying recurring psychological themes and patterns. The analysis aimed to understand how false confessions affected the

psychological well-being of wrongfully convicted individuals and how these effects continued even after the legal proceedings had ended.

The present study relied entirely on the secondary sources of data. Information was collected from published research articles, books, legal records, court documents, documentaries, interviews and case studies related to false confessions and wrongful convictions. These sources were selected because they provide detailed information regarding the experiences of the individuals involved, the circumstances surrounding their confessions and the psychological experiences.

Purposive sampling was used to select cases that were directly related to false confessions and wrongful convictions. Five case studies that were chosen = Brendan Dassey, Amanda Knox, Richard Lapointe, Mary Tankleff and Peter Reilly. These cases helped to provide comprehensive insight into the psychological effects of false confessions highlighted experiences such as emotional distress, identity disturbances, learned helplessness and long term psychological consequences.

As for the ethical consideration, since the study relied heavily on the secondary data so no direct participants were involved in the research and all the information used in the study were obtained from the publicly available and credible sources like published research articles, books, legal records, documentaries, interviews and published case studies. This study was conducted for solely academic purposes and aimed to understand the psychological impact of false confessions without causing harm or misrepresenting the individual. The case studies were used objectively and respectfully while maintaining the accuracy of the information.

DATA COLLECTION:

For the data collection for this present study, there were five case studies that were selected and the detailed explanation is given below =

1. BRENDAN DASSEY =

The case of Brandon Dassey is one of the widely used examples of false confessions in the US. In 2005, sixteen year old Dassey became involved in the investigation into the murder of Teresa Halbach in Wisconsin. Dassey, who had limited intellectual abilities and no prior experience with police interrogation, was questioned repeatedly about the crime. Although he initially denied involvement then eventually he provided statements that implicated both himself and his uncle. His confession became a central piece of evidence used during the trial and however, concerns were raised regarding the reliability of his statements. Many experts argued that his age, susceptibility and vulnerability made him susceptible to giving false confessions.

According to the legal records, investigators conducted several interviews with Brendan over a period of months and during these investigations, officers repeatedly encouraged him to provide information and often suggested that honesty would help him and many details included in his confession remained inconsistent and changed over time. Despite the lack of physical evidence directly linking Brendan to the crime, the investigators considered his confession to be a major breakthrough in the case but later critics argued that interrogation techniques may have influenced his responses and contributed to the false confession.

Court records show that Brendan Dassey's confession played a significant role during his trial. Brendan was convicted and sentenced to life imprisonment and over the years, his case became a subject of legal appeals and public debate. Questions regarding his age, cognitive functioning and the interrogation

methods used by the investigators led many psychologists and legal experts to argue that his confession was unreliable and may have been the result of psychological pressure rather than guilt.

The interrogation of Brendan Dassey has been frequently examined within forensic psychology because it illustrates how vulnerable individuals may be influenced during questioning. Many experts have argued that Dassey's age, intellectual limitations and the desire to please authority figures increased his suggestibility and compliance and as a result, his confession became an important example of how psychological vulnerability and interrogation can contribute to false confession.

2. AMANDA KNOX =

The case of Amanda Knox became one of the most widely publicized criminal investigations in the world. In 2007, Meredith Krecher, a British exchange student studying in Italy was found murdered in Perugia. Amanda was Meredith's roommate and became a primary suspect during the interrogation and at the time, Amanda was twenty one years old with no prior criminal record. Amanda underwent several rounds of questioning by Italian police, she made statements implicating herself and Patrick, the local bar owner. Her statements became a subject for controversy as Amanda claimed that they were made under conditions of stress, confusion and psychological pressure. Later DNA evidence and further investigations led to her exoneration.

According to legal records, investigators initially focused on Amanda and her then boyfriend. During prolonged questioning sessions Amanda signed statements that her then boyfriend had been involved in the murder and later, she admitted that those admissions resulted from exhaustion, fear and confusion caused by the interrogation process. Critics argued that interrogation procedures and language barriers may have influenced her recollections and contributed to inaccurate statements.

Court records indicated that Amanda and her then boyfriend were convicted in 2009 and however, the case went through several trials and appeals. Questioning regarding forensic evidence, investigative procedures and the reliability of Amanda statements became central issues throughout the legal proceedings. The case attracted worldwide attention and raised important questions regarding interrogation practices and the reliability of statements obtained under stressful conditions.

Amanda later explained that she had been subjected to lengthy questioning while experiencing fatigue, stress, fear and emotional confusion and according to her account, investigators repeatedly pressured her to remember events and suggested possible scenarios and she later described her statements as the results of confusion rather than genuine memories. Forensic psychologists and legal experts have examined the case as an example of how stress, exhaustion and psychological pressure can influence memory and decision making.

3. RICHARD LAPOINTE =

The case of Richard Lapointe is considered an important example of false confession involving a psychologically vulnerable individual. In 1987, Bernice Martin, the eighty eight years old grandmother of Richard's wife was found murdered in Connecticut. During the investigation, Richard became a suspect and was questioned by police and Richard suffered from Dandy Walker syndrome, a neurological condition where it affected his cognitive functioning and made him particularly vulnerable during stressful conditions. Richard maintained his innocence but eventually took the blame and these statements became a major factor in the case against him. In 1992, he was convicted and sentenced to life imprisonment. After spending more than twenty five years in prison, new evidence and legal reviews led to the overturning of his conviction, all the charges were dropped and eventually dismissed.

According to legal records , investigators focused on Richard's inconsistencies emerged during the early stages of the investigation. He underwent approximately nine and half hours of interrogation without legal representation and during questioning , Richard provided statements that the investigators interpreted as guilt. Critics later argued that his neurological conditions and cognitive limitations made him highly susceptible to pressure and suggestion.

Prosecutors relied heavily on the confession and other circumstantial evidence to establish guilt and as a result, he was convicted and sentenced to life imprisonment without parole. Years later , the Connecticut supreme court ruled that Richard had been denied fair trial because the important information had not been disclosed to the defense. Further , the DNA testing did not give out evidence that connected him to the crime and in 2015 , he was released and his case became an important example of wrongful conviction and false confession involving individuals with cognitive vulnerabilities.

4. MARTY TANKLEFF =

The case of Marty Tankleff is one of the widely known false confession cases in the US in the late 1980s. A seventeen year old Marty discovered his parents were severely injured in their home in Long Island, New York and later, his mother died in the scene and the father was taken to the hospital in critical condition. During the investigation , police focused their attention on Marty and subjected him to hours of questioning. Although Marty repeatedly denied any involvement in the murders, the investigators used psychological tactics to convince him and then his father had accused Marty after he regained consciousness. Marty became emotionally distressed and eventually made incriminating statements and then later , Marty retracted his statements and also maintained that he never committed the crime. After spending eighteen years in prison, his conviction was overturned and the charges against him were dismissed.

According to legal records, investigators concentrated on Marty early in the investigation and during the lengthy interrogation, officers falsely informed him that his father had awakened from a coma and blamed him for the murders. This statement was untrue as his father had never regained consciousness and following this deception, Marty became confused and emotionally overwhelmed. Although , there is no physical evidence linking him to crime and the investigators treated his statements as admissions of guilt. Critics argued that the interrogation techniques used by police played a significant role in producing a false confession to his wrongful conviction.

Court records indicate that Marty's unsigned confession became the cornerstone of the prosecution's case. Throughout the years, his attorneys filed several appeals and also argued that his confession had been obtained through deceptive and coercive interrogation methods, New evidence emerged that other individuals may have been responsible for the murders and in 2007, Marty's conviction was vacated and in 2008, the prosecutors formally dismissed all charges.

Experts have argued that the combination of grief , confusion , stress and deceptive interrogation tactics increased his vulnerability. This case demonstrated how emotionally distressed individuals may become susceptible to suggestion and may doubt their own recollection. It also highlighted the dangers of relying heavily on confession obtained through psychological and deceptive practices.

5. PETER REILLY =

The case of Peter Reilly is another example of false confessions in the US in 1973. Peter returned home and discovered that his mother was dead in their Connecticut home. Peter was shocked and distressed by the incident and he immediately contacted the authorities and during the investigation , police questioned Peter for several hours regarding the circumstances surrounding his mother's death. Initially , Peter

maintained that he had no involvement in the crime but however , after prolonged questioning and repeatedly suggestions from the investigators , he eventually began doubting his own memory and later , he signed a confession admitting to the murder and despite the confession , questions were raised regarding the reliability of his statements and further , investigations revealed inconsistencies and finally in 1976 , all charges against him were dismissed.

According to legal records , investigators focused on Peter shortly after the discovery of the crime and during the investigation , police repeatedly suggested that he may have committed the crime but the memory was blocked because of psychological trauma. Investigators encouraged him to trust their interpretation rather than his own recollection. Critics later argued that psychological pressure and suggestive questioning played an important role in producing the confession.

The case demonstrated how the innocent individuals may internalise false beliefs and begin to accept responsibility for the crimes that they did not commit and it also revealed how the powerful influence that authority figures and interrogation techniques can have on memory and self perception.

DATA ANALYSIS:

The collected data from the selected case studies were analyzed using thematic analysis. The analysis focused on identifying recurring psychological consequences experienced by the individuals who were falsely confessed and were subsequently wrongfully convicted.

Five major themes emerged from the analysis and the explanation of these five themes are given below in points -

1. Erosion of Personal Reality =

One of the most significant psychological consequences observed across the case studies was the erosion of personal reality. In several cases, individuals began questioning their own memories, perception and understanding of events after prolonged and repeated accusations.

Rather than simply doubting specific details, some individuals appeared to lose confidence in their ability to determine what was true. This psychological disruption was particularly evident in the cases where investigators repeatedly challenged the individual's recollection of events and presented alternative narratives as fact and as a result , individuals became increasingly uncertain about their own experiences and judgement.

2. Psychological Dependency on Authority =

This analysis revealed that false confessions often created a psychological dependency on authority figures. During the intense interrogation processes , some individuals gradually shifted from trusting their own knowledge to rely on investigators for explanations and interpretation of events. In certain cases, individuals appeared to accept information provided by the authority figures even when it contradicted their own recollections.

This dependency reduced confidence in personal judgement and increased reliance on external validation. These findings suggest that the interrogation process can contribute to a diminished sense of personal autonomy and decision making.

3. Identity Reconstruction After Exoneration =

A recurring theme across the cases was the challenge of rebuilding one's identity after exoneration. Wrongful conviction often resulted in the individuals being publicly labelled as criminals and for many years.

Even after being declared innocent , many continued to struggle with the psychological effects of this imp-

used identity and the process of separating themselves from the false narrative and rebuilding a sense of self appeared to be emotionally demanding. As a result, these findings suggest that exoneration may restore legal innocence but it does not automatically restore an individual's psychological identity.

4. Chronic Need for Self-Justification =

The analysis also indicated that many individuals experienced a persistent need to defend their innocence and justify themselves long after their cases had ended. Although legal exoneration removed formal accusations, public suspicion and the social stigma often remained.

As a result, individuals frequently felt compelled to explain their experiences, correct misconceptions and repeatedly reaffirm their innocence. This ongoing need for self justification created additional psychological problems for some individuals from fully moving beyond their wrongful conviction.

5. Loss of Psychological Safety =

Another significant theme that emerged was the loss of psychological safety and prior to their experiences, many individuals likely viewed legal institutions and authority figures as sources of protection and justice. However, the wrongful conviction and false confession altered that perception.

The realisation that innocence alone was not enough to prevent punishment contributed to the feelings of vulnerability and insecurity. And this created a sense of loss for psychological safety which had extended beyond the legal process and influenced how individuals viewed authority, trust and personal security in everyday life.

DISCUSSION:

The present study aimed to examine the psychological impact of false confessions on individuals who were wrongfully convicted. Through the analysis of five case studies, several psychological consequences were identified, including erosion of personal reality, psychological dependency on authority, identity reconstruction after exoneration, chronic need for self-justification, and loss of psychological safety. These findings suggest that the impact of false confessions extends beyond legal consequences and can have lasting effects on an individual's psychological well-being.

One of the most significant findings of the study was the erosion of personal reality experienced by some individuals. Previous research has highlighted memory distrust and suggestibility as important factors associated with false confessions. However, the present analysis suggests that the consequences may extend further, affecting an individual's confidence in their own perceptions, memories, and understanding of events. When individuals are repeatedly confronted with accusations and contradictory narratives, they may begin to question their own reality, leading to confusion and uncertainty about what is true.

The study also identified psychological dependency on authority as an important consequence of false confessions. In several cases, individuals appeared to place increasing trust in investigators and authority figures while simultaneously losing confidence in their own judgment. This finding is consistent with research on compliance and suggestibility, which suggests that vulnerable individuals may become more likely to accept information provided by authority figures. The present study indicates that this process may continue beyond the confession itself and influence an individual's sense of autonomy and decision-making.

Another important finding was the difficulty many individuals faced in reconstructing their identity after exoneration. Wrongful conviction often resulted in individuals being publicly labelled as offenders, sometimes for years. Although legal exoneration restored their innocence in the eyes of the law, it did not automatically eliminate the psychological effects of that label. Many individuals were required to rebuild

their sense of self and redefine their identity following their experiences. This finding highlights the long-term psychological burden associated with wrongful conviction and social stigma.

The findings further revealed that many individuals experienced a chronic need for self-justification. Even after being cleared of wrongdoing, they often felt compelled to repeatedly explain their experiences and defend their innocence. This suggests that the psychological consequences of false confessions do not necessarily end with release or exoneration. Instead, individuals may continue to experience social and psychological pressures that affect their well-being and ability to move forward with their lives.

The study also identified a loss of psychological safety among wrongfully convicted individuals. The experience of being falsely accused and convicted appeared to alter their trust in legal institutions and authority figures. Many individuals were confronted with the realization that innocence alone could not guarantee protection from wrongful punishment. As a result, feelings of vulnerability, insecurity, and distrust often persisted long after the legal process had ended.

Taken together, these findings suggest that false confessions have profound psychological consequences that extend beyond immediate emotional distress. While previous studies have focused primarily on the causes, prevalence, and legal implications of false confessions, the present study highlights the importance of understanding the lived psychological experiences of those who have endured them. The findings demonstrate that false confessions can affect an individual's perception of reality, identity, autonomy, and sense of security, often producing long-term consequences that continue even after exoneration.

From a forensic psychology perspective, these findings emphasize the need for interrogation practices that minimize psychological pressure and protect vulnerable individuals. Understanding the long-term psychological consequences of false confessions may also help inform policies, support services, and rehabilitation efforts for wrongfully convicted individuals. Greater attention to these experiences may contribute to a more humane and psychologically informed criminal justice system.

LIMITATIONS:

The present study has certain limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the study relied entirely on secondary sources of data including the published research articles, books, legal records, interviews, documentaries and case studies.

Secondly, the study focused on a small number of case studies and although the selected case provided a valuable insight into the psychological impact of false confessions and the findings cannot be overgeneralized to every case related to false confession and different cases may involve varying personal, social and legal circumstances psychological outcomes.

Another limitation is that the study focused specifically on the psychological impact of false confessions and wrongful conviction. Other important aspects such as legal procedures, interrogation practices, institutional factors and broader social consequences were not examined in detail.

Finally, the other limitation is that the case studies that were taken were high profile cases that received significant public and media attention and the less known cases may experience different psychological consequences that were not captured within the scope of the present research.

CONCLUSION:

The present study aimed to examine the psychological impact of false confessions on individuals who were wrongfully convicted. Using a qualitative case study approach, the experiences of five individuals involved in false confession cases were analyzed to understand the long-term psychological consequences

associated with wrongful conviction. The findings revealed that the impact of false confessions extends far beyond legal outcomes and can significantly affect an individual's psychological well-being.

The thematic analysis identified five major psychological consequences: erosion of personal reality, psychological dependency on authority, identity reconstruction after exoneration, chronic need for self-justification, and loss of psychological safety. These findings suggest that individuals who experience false confessions often face complex psychological challenges that continue even after legal proceedings have ended. The consequences are not limited to emotional distress alone but may also influence how individuals perceive themselves, trust others, and interact with the world around them.

The study highlights the importance of viewing false confessions not only as legal or investigative failures but also as experiences with profound psychological consequences. By focusing on the lived experiences of wrongfully convicted individuals, the present research contributes to a deeper understanding of the human cost associated with false confessions. The findings demonstrate that the effects of wrongful conviction can persist long after exoneration and may require considerable psychological adjustment and recovery.

From a forensic psychology perspective, the study emphasizes the need for interrogation practices that protect vulnerable individuals and reduce the risk of false confessions. It also highlights the importance of providing psychological support for individuals who have experienced wrongful conviction and exoneration. Greater awareness of these psychological consequences may contribute to fairer investigative procedures, improved support systems, and a more psychologically informed criminal justice system.

In conclusion, false confessions represent more than a threat to justice; they can have lasting effects on an individual's identity, perception of reality, trust in authority, and overall psychological well-being. Understanding these consequences is essential for recognizing the full impact of wrongful convictions and for promoting a criminal justice system that is both fair and humane.

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