



D22 What Criminal Investigators Believe are the Causes of False Confessions

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After attending this presentation, attendees will gain an appreciation of what criminal investigators believe are the causes of false confessions.

This presentation will impact the forensic community and/or humanity by demonstrating how false confessions have placed many innocent suspects in prison for lengthy incarcerations or executions. It is hoped that criminal investigators will take a more stringent view of what causes false confessions.

False confessions have become a mysterious phenomenon in recent years. Many innocent suspects have been exposed to the criminal interrogation only to provide their questioners with confessions to crimes they did not commit. Following these confessions, innocent defendants have been convicted and legally sanctioned for these reported crimes.

False confessions have been categorized as voluntary, coerced-compliant, and coerced-internalized. The voluntary false confession, the only one that is not influenced by law enforcement, is made by suspects who seek notoriety, suffer from mental illness, or attempt to protect the culpable party. The coerced-compliant false confession is a stressed-induced confession. Pressures exerted by interrogators may cause innocent suspects to succumb to accusations, and in an attempt to flee the intensity of the interrogation, confess to whatever the interrogator wishes. Their belief that a lack of evidence will prevent their convictions is often misled. The coerced-internalized false confession is received from suspects who experience mental breakdowns. Often consisting of confabulation, these confessions consist of fictional portrayals of what "could have" happened during the crime.

The forerunners of confession evidence are the criminal investigators who interrogate their suspects. In most interrogation courses, whether provided by police academies or commercial vendors, the criminal investigators are trained in various techniques and tactics that will assist them in inducing suspects to confess. Most criminal investigators are aware of the voluntary false confession, since high-profile investigations tend to draw these confessors to the public eye. However, the understanding and causation of the coerced-compliant and coerced-internalized false confessions is lacking.

A study was conducted of criminal investigators in St. Lawrence County, New York. The intention of the study was to determine what criminal investigators believed were the causes of false and truthful confessions. Interestingly enough, most respondents were able to define the various categories of false confessions. However, when questioned concerning their causation, the respondents were quite diverse in their beliefs. It was noted however, that the ones believed primarily responsible for the false confessions were the suspects and not the investigators themselves. Other aspects of false confession causation addressed suspect suggestibility, the coercive environment, and confession reliability in court.

The majority of criminal investigators believed that the typical interrogation room was not coercive to the extent that it would contribute to the false confession. In terms of suspect suggestibility, it was believed that young, novice suspects were more prone to make false confessions. Alcohol was not believed to be a contributory factor for false confessions, but drug usage and substance withdrawal were. According to the respondents, all confessions, once admitted into court as evidence, could be deemed as reliable. This was placed solely upon the court's review of the confession's competency, and not the interrogation process. In this regard, false confessions have been admitted into court thereby causing sanctions against innocent defendants.

Voluntary, Coerced-Compliant, Coerced-Internalized